

Populism, Corruption and War

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Positive Achievements and Missed Opportunities

Populism never leads to an economic miracle. The rhetoric of sweet promises is aimed only at coming to power. The ideas of populism do not improve the mechanisms of government operation; they do not increase budget revenues. On the contrary, these ideas often become the cause of new problems for the state and its citizens.

Countries that have had the misfortune of falling under the rule of populists suffer from this affliction based on the strength of their economy and state institutions. The weaker and poorer the country, the more severe the consequences. Typically, they manifest as high inflation, increased poverty, and even suppression of civil liberties.

Nowadays, populism is not limited to the borders of Latin America and Africa. In Eastern Europe, there is a country where the rise to power of an incompetent showman-populist triggered a chain of events that led to the greatest war on the continent since Hitler, with hundreds of thousands of deaths and millions of refugees. As you might have guessed, this refers to Ukraine and Volodymyr Zelensky.

The election of a comedian as president was the logical outcome of years of oligarchic influence on politics and the mass media. However, Zelensky was far from the first attempt by big business to reap political dividends. I hope this book will help you better understand how the oligarchs managed to defeat systemic politicians and why the victory of a populist once again did not lead to prosperity.

The Comedian's Rise

Volodymyr Oleksandrovych Zelensky was born on January 25, 1978, in the city of Kryvyi Rih to a family of a lecturer at Kryvyi Rih Economic Institute, Oleksandr Semenovych, and an engineer, Rimma Volodymyrivna. Unlike the future president's father, who was mainly known in the city for his teaching activities, Zelensky's grandfather was quite famous in Kryvyi Rih. Semyon Ivanovich Zelensky worked for a long time as the deputy chief of the criminal search department of the city police and retired with the rank of colonel. According to local residents, he actively participated in suppressing street protests in 1963. Officially, 4 civilians were killed in Kryvyi Rih, unofficially – 7 people died.

When Volodymyr Zelensky was three years old, he moved with his family to Mongolia, where his father got a job debugging electronic equipment at a mining and processing plant in the city of Erdenet. Four years later, the Zelenskys returned to Kryvyi Rih, and Volodya went to the second grade of local school №95.

During his school years, Zelensky showed great interest in theater, music, and the English language. A special passion of his was KVN (Club of the Funny and Inventive, Klub Vesyolykh i Nakhodchivyh) – a Soviet television show where several teams of students compete in humorous responses and perform pre-prepared sketches on stage.

For a time, comedy shows were just a hobby. Volodymyr envisioned his future in moving to Israel. In 2019, before the presidential elections, in an interview with journalist Dmytro Gordon, Zelensky shared that at the age of 16, he won a grant for free education in Israel but never left. His father was categorically against his son's departure. The conflict escalated to the extent that Volodymyr had to run away from home. As a sign of protest, he lived for several days with his school friend Oleksandr Pikalov. However, eventually, the son complied with his father's decision, and Israel was forgotten.

After finishing school in 1995, Volodymyr Zelensky enrolled in the law faculty of the local institute where his father worked. There is very little information about the future president's academic achievements during his student years. But it's unlikely anyone would claim that Volodymyr graduated as a good lawyer. He spent most of his student time not on studying the criminal law, but on comedy

sketches. From the first year, Zelensky began to perform actively in KVN, and the next year, he moved to a professional level. He was invited to the team "Zaporizhzhia – Kryvyi Rih – Transit," where Volodymyr started with dance numbers and later became one of the leaders of this creative collective.

Joining such a level KVN team was a significant success. It was no longer provincial amateur performance in a local university. Zelensky started traveling to Moscow and Sochi for television shootings. Every three to four months, he was regularly shown on Russian television, which at the time was broadcasted, including in Ukraine. And most importantly, millions of people remembered his face.

In 1997, the team "Zaporizhzhia – Kryvyi Rih – Transit" reached the finals of the KVN Premier League and shared first place with the team "New Armenians." After such success, Zelensky made a risky but correct decision. He left the Zaporizhzhia team and founded his own KVN team. It was named "Kvartal 95," after the district of Kryvyi Rih where Volodymyr went to school.

Since Zelensky's jokes were liked by the audience, the perennial host of KVN, Alexander Maslyakov, allowed the new team to perform directly in the Premier League, without the need to spend an extra year winning regional games.

Volodymyr Zelensky was not mistaken. His charisma started to bring profit. From 1998 to 2003, members of "Kvartal 95" spent most of their time in Moscow, where the show was recorded for television, or on tours in different cities of Russia, Ukraine, and other former USSR countries.

In 2003, Maslyakov offered Zelensky to stay in Moscow as an author and editor of the television program. The future president thought it over and made, perhaps, the wisest decision in his life – he declined the tempting offer and left KVN. His face and jokes were known to tens of millions of people. The prospect of remaining an employee and giving a large part of the income to Maslyakov was not too appealing. Zelensky was confident that he could monetize his popularity without anyone's help.

After breaking up with KVN, the "Kvartal 95" team moved to Kyiv, where Zelensky signed a contract with the "1 + 1" TV channel, which at the time was owned by Olexandr Rodnyansky and his cousin, German citizen Boris Fuksman. The contract terms stipulated that "Kvartal 95" would create a series of concerts including their best comedy sketches, and the channel would air them in prime time.

Fortunately, the program's ratings were high, and the management of "1 + 1" offered Zelensky cooperation on a permanent basis.

In 2004, the "Kvartal 95" team participated in the pre-election campaign in support of the presidential candidate of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovych. As it turned out, this decision negatively affected further cooperation between Zelensky and the "1 + 1" channel. The fact is that during the second round of elections, massive falsifications occurred in favor of Yanukovych. This led to the so-called "Orange Revolution." A day after the election results were announced, the streets of Kyiv were blocked by hundreds of thousands of protesters from all over Ukraine. After two weeks of street confrontation, the Supreme Court annulled the results of the second round. As a result of an additional third round of elections, the leader of the democratic opposition, Viktor Yushchenko, became the President of Ukraine.

The owner of the channel, Rodnyansky, overdid it with support for Yanukovych, and it almost ruined Zelensky's television career. During the election campaign, the "1 + 1" channel actively participated in discrediting Yushchenko. This was reflected not only in news stories but also in the Sunday analytical program of Vyacheslav Pikhovshek "Epicenter." And on weekdays, after the evening news broadcast TSN, a real five minutes of hate began: a short TV program "Prote," during which Dmytro Korchynsky and Dmytro Dzhangirov alternately convinced viewers why Yushchenko's victory was bad, and Yanukovych's victory would only benefit Ukrainians.

The start of the revolution greatly frightened Rodnyansky and Fuksman. They had bet a lot on Yanukovych's victory and now were seriously afraid of losing their broadcasting license. And on November 25, 2004, under the pressure of street marches and rallies, the Supreme Court of Ukraine issued a ban on the Central Election Commission publishing the results of the second round of elections. It was a victory for the opposition. Now everyone understood that the next decision of the Supreme Court would annul the results and appoint a repeat vote.

The news from the Supreme Court building led to an astonishing transformation of Ukrainian television journalism. Just a few hours after the court's decision to ban the publication of election results, the team of the "1 + 1" channel, led by Rodnyansky, suddenly saw the light and rose up against censorship. Before the evening news broadcast on November 25, the journalists, together with the channel's management, released a statement and a video about the need to adhere to impartiality and journalistic standards.

How did this affect the cooperation with Volodymyr Zelensky's company? Very simply. To assure the new president of their loyalty to the ideals of democracy, the management of "1 + 1" closed all programs with Zelensky and his "Kvartal 95." After all, the young comedian not only participated in the campaign for Yanukovych but also allowed himself harsh jokes about opposition leaders. Obviously, Rodnyansky was afraid of revenge from the new authorities, so he played it safe and expelled not only Pikhovshek, Dzhangirov, and Korchynsky from the channel, but also Zelensky.

The following months showed that the fears of the "1 + 1" management were exaggerated. President Yushchenko had no intention of closing the channel that had slandered him before the elections. And they had no problems with their broadcasting license. As a consequence, unpunished evil returned in the future. Fifteen years after the events of 2004, the "1 + 1" channel once again used its influence on the audience to spread black PR, now against President Poroshenko. For example, in March 2019, the program "Ukrainian Sensations" on the "1 + 1" channel claimed that Poroshenko had killed his brother in his youth. Although this was an outright lie, the channel's editors were not bothered by it.

After ending cooperation with "1 + 1," Zelensky moved to another nationwide TV channel – "Inter." There, the future president not only joked from the stage but also launched a cooking show with his participation "Mr. Cook." His face could also be seen in the adventure TV show "Fort Boyard" and several other projects.

As the head of the media company "Studio Kvartal 95," Volodymyr Zelensky proved to be a fairly good manager. His comedy programs consistently showed high ratings, and in 2007 he managed to expand his business into film production. Over 10 years as a producer, Zelensky released more than 20 entertainment TV series and 12 movies. All of them were shot in Russian and primarily targeted the Russian market.

In November 2010, Zelensky became the general producer of the "Inter" TV channel. He did not influence the news broadcasts (others handled that) and was not interested in politics. His task was high ratings, with which Volodymyr successfully coped. He worked as a top manager of the "Inter" channel for two years. In 2012, he and "Kvartal" returned to "1 + 1." The new owner of the channel, oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky, offered Zelensky a more favorable cooperation option.

Lazarenko, Who Showed the Way to All

To understand why Zelensky did not stay in the field of entertainment content production but won the presidential election, one must start with the story of Pavlo Lazarenko – the Prime Minister of Ukraine in 1996-1997 and arguably the most scandalous politician of that era. He never met the main character of our book, but Lazarenko's activities indirectly influenced the events that, ultimately, led Volodymyr Zelensky to power.

In 1990, the former agronomist, then the second secretary of the Communist Party of the Novomoskovsk district of the Dnipropetrovsk region, unexpectedly rose high in the local hierarchy. At the age of 37, Pavlo Lazarenko was elected head of the Dnipropetrovsk Regional Council. Two years after the USSR collapsed, the young official of independent Ukraine became the full-fledged master of an entire region – President Leonid Kravchuk appointed him his representative in Dnipropetrovsk.

Unlike many other regional leaders, whose criminal abilities did not go beyond customary bribery, Pavlo Lazarenko quickly realized the opportunities capitalism combined with a state position could bring him. Almost immediately after being appointed as the president's representative, he created a cunning scheme whereby every major business in the region he was entrusted with had to pay a certain amount into Lazarenko's personal fund.

What about law enforcement agencies? That's the point, law enforcement agencies were subordinate to the head of the region, and not a single prosecutor dared to initiate and investigate such a case. As for Kyiv, firstly, the capital was far away, and secondly, large sums of money have a remarkable way of turning a blind eye, even in Kyiv.

In one interview, after ending his tumultuous career, Pavlo Lazarenko boasted that he was the one who paved the way for future oligarchs and politicians from Dnipropetrovsk: Pinchuk, Kolomoisky, Tymoshenko, and Tigipko. There might be some truth to this, especially regarding Yulia Tymoshenko. But was Lazarenko the "godfather" of Kolomoisky or Pinchuk?

There are big doubts about that. Both future oligarchs were not part of the governor's mafia structure. They just submitted to him and played by his rules. At that time, Lazarenko was the powerful head of Ukraine's largest region, while Pinchuk and Kolomoisky were just two local businessmen who had to pay the regional master for the right to

make money on his territory.

Pinchuk and Kolomoisky not only paid certain sums into the head of the regional state administration's fund but also agreed to give him a share of their business. According to the Ukrainian version of Forbes magazine, in 1996, Lazarenko ordered Kolomoisky and his business partner Boholiubov to transfer 16.7% of the oil company "Sentosa Ltd" to his driver, Leonid Hadiachuk, and give away 14% of the shares of the company "Solm," which owned a third of PrivatBank. It should be noted that after receiving a share in someone else's business, as a decent racketeer, Pavlo Lazarenko in every way facilitated the development of PrivatBank.

In 1995, the young official from Dnipropetrovsk moved up, relocated to the capital, and became the first Vice Prime Minister of Ukraine. A year later, he took the highest post after the president as the head of the government. By that time, Pavlo Ivanovich Lazarenko was only 43 years old.

Why did Kuchma agree to appoint him as Prime Minister? Several factors contributed to this. Lazarenko already had his own "Unity" faction in the parliament. The moment for adopting a new Constitution was approaching, so the president needed additional votes from deputies. Moreover, Leonid Kuchma did not really like the previous Prime Minister – former KGB general Yevhen Marchuk. He saw him as a potential competitor in the upcoming presidential elections, whereas Lazarenko assured Kuchma of his loyalty. And, of course, the governor of the Dnipropetrovsk region impressed as an effective manager who could quickly restore order. Firmness, cunning, endurance – that was his element.

It is believed that Lazarenko invented the corrupt practice of buying deputies of the Verkhovna Rada. The term "buying" implies luring formally independent MPs elected in single-member district and deputies from other factions into his faction.

Kuchma and Lazarenko worked together for just over a year. The young talent from Dnipropetrovsk did not show any special breakthroughs in the economy. However, the shadow scale of Pavlo Lazarenko's activities troubled Kuchma. The president was indifferent to corruption – he knew perfectly well what the Prime Minister was doing and for some time, it suited him. But Lazarenko concentrated large financial resources in his hands, and there were just over two years left until the elections. Kuchma planned to be re-elected for a second term, so any Prime Minister who was shown daily to the whole

country on television was a priori a potential competitor for him.

On July 2, 1997, Pavlo Lazarenko was dismissed from the position of the head of the government allegedly "due to health reasons." It seemed that after this, he should fade into obscurity. Having lost political protection from prosecution by law enforcement agencies, the former Prime Minister, at a minimum, should have been cautious about Kuchma, since the president controlled the Prosecutor General's Office, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the SBU (Security Service of Ukraine, Sluzhba Bezpeky Ukrayiny). However, Lazarenko so believed in his own fortunate fate that he decided to become the leader of the opposition and return to power. Later it turned out to be his biggest mistake.

Here it's worth adding a few words about where the former agronomist got such huge financial resources, by the standards of the time. Regular levies from Kolomoisky, Pinchuk, and other Dnipropetrovsk businessmen were just the tip of the iceberg. Pavlo Lazarenko earned even more on the gas market as an unofficial co-owner of the company "EESU."

In the early 90s, Lazarenko became close to the local businesswoman Yulia Tymoshenko, who once started with a video rental shop and then moved on to trading oil products and gas. For a while, Tymoshenko's business partners were Viktor Pinchuk and Serhiy Tigipko.

Thanks to cooperation with the president's representative, Tymoshenko's company "United Energy Systems of Ukraine" (EESU) became the main supplier of gas to the enterprises of the Dnipropetrovsk region. In 1996, when Pavlo Lazarenko became Prime Minister, Tymoshenko moved to a national level and also relocated to Kyiv.

Buying gas in Turkmenistan for \$36 per 1000 cubic meters, Tymoshenko's company almost immediately sold it in Ukraine for \$80. In just a few years, both partners: Tymoshenko and Lazarenko earned at least \$300 million. In the 90s, this was a fantastic amount.

The scale of cooperation between the two partners is evidenced by the testimony for the FBI, which on May 17, 2000, was given by Pavlo Lazarenko's former friend and ally – Petro Kirichenko. According to him, Pavlo Lazarenko paid Prime Minister Marchuk \$7 million for allowing Tymoshenko's company to enter the gas trade market. The money was transferred to Marchuk's account at Union Bank of Switzerland.

As for cooperation with Kuchma, according to the same Kirichenko, in a private conversation, after his dismissal as Prime Minister, Lazarenko told him that he owed Kuchma \$50 million, but he would rather spend that money to remove him from office than return them to the president. Why Lazarenko owed Kuchma \$50 million remained a mystery. Kirichenko also stated in his testimony to the FBI that, while serving as the head of the government, Lazarenko transferred \$3 million to a company controlled by the president's assistant, Olexandr Volkov.

None of Kuchma's entourage, including Pinchuk and Kolomoisky, ever testified against Lazarenko for American law enforcement. Although publicly, President Kuchma regularly called the former Prime Minister the main corrupt official and the cause of all the troubles of Ukrainians.

Yulia Tymoshenko's fate turned out to be even more interesting. Having moved to Kyiv, the former video rental shop owner made a dizzying political career. After Lazarenko's downfall, she quickly shed him as a toxic asset, left his "Hromada" party, and created her own political project "Batkivshchyna." She became Prime Minister twice, was in opposition to Presidents Kuchma and Yanukovych, and was twice imprisoned on trumped-up charges. Eventually, Yulia Tymoshenko's highest achievement was participating in the presidential elections in 2010 and 2014, where she twice came in second, losing first to Viktor Yanukovych and then to Petro Poroshenko.

But let's return to 1997. After resigning, Lazarenko automatically acquired the status of a member of parliament (at that time, the Verkhovna Rada had a norm that allowed combining deputy activity and work in the government). Setting himself the goal of becoming Prime Minister again, and possibly even President, he began actively encouraging other MPs to switch to his banner. The price tag: \$30,000 for joining Lazarenko's faction and \$7,000 monthly.

Buying deputies within the parliament, like a cancerous tumor, quickly spread to other parties. This phenomenon reached its greatest extent under President Yanukovych. In 2012, joining the pro-government faction of the Party of Regions paid between \$500,000 to \$2 million plus a monthly "salary" of \$30,000-50,000. Some deputies were offered up to \$5 million to join.

Around the same time, another illegal practice spread among Ukrainian parties: selling places in parliament. A large businessman

could easily become a Rada deputy for just \$5-10 million. Typically, even now, at least 10% of the seats in parliamentary factions are occupied by those who bought their deputy seat in exchange for financial support before the elections.

Nearly 30 years have passed since Lazarenko's time. And although luring deputies in parliament is now banned, unofficial salaries are still paid. According to several deputies who scandalously left the "Servant of the People" faction, each of its members receives "in an envelope" from the President's Office from \$20,000 to \$50,000 monthly. The maximum amount (\$50,000) is paid to the head of the Verkhovna Rada committee. The deputy chairman of the committee receives \$30,000 each month. Meanwhile, the official salary of a people's deputy is about 48,000 hryvnias (\$1,200).

It should be noted that political corruption is widespread even in opposition factions. There, too, salaries are paid "in envelopes." In the Ukrainian parliament, financial motivation is the best guarantee that a MP will vote in unison with the party leader.

In civilized countries, such manipulations are considered a criminal offense. Firstly, monthly cash gifts or cryptocurrency are not declared for tax purposes. That is, at the very least, tax evasion. Secondly, it's bribery. Thirdly, the sources of these funds are highly questionable. For example, in 2023, the "Servant of the People" faction had about 200 deputies. Even by the minimum calculation, Zelensky annually spent \$50 million just to ensure that deputies did not act too independently and disciplined voted for the necessary bills.

Undoubtedly, these \$50 million are not personally paid by Zelensky or Yermak out of their pockets. Obviously, there is a black fund filled from corrupt sources: primarily, from the infrastructure program "Big Construction."

Pavlo Lazarenko is interesting for our story in that he was the first to show that big money in Ukraine could be made in politics. And his downfall became a lesson and an example for the new oligarchs who bulked up during Kuchma's second presidential term: Kolomoisky, Pinchuk, and Akhmetov.

Lazarenko's mistake was that he overestimated his capabilities and did not take into account the power of the media. Without media support (except for a few newspapers), Lazarenko went against the all-powerful President Kuchma. And just a year and a half later, due to the threat of arrest, he had to flee abroad. On February 14, 1999, Pavlo Lazarenko flew to Greece and then to New York, where he was

detained at the airport with a Panamanian passport.

In America, Lazarenko was charged with money laundering. A year before being detained at JFK terminal, he bought a large house near San Francisco for \$6.7 million, where Hollywood actor Eddie Murphy once lived. Since Lazarenko could not explain the legal origin of such a significant sum, this fact became one of the list of charges in an American court. Then, to money laundering, were added fraud and racketeering. The main witness against the former Prime Minister was his ally Petro Kirichenko. As it turned out later, Pavlo Lazarenko forced him to give up a share in the business too.

After several years of court hearings, Lazarenko received 12 years in prison. Having been released in 2012, he stayed in California and decided to live like an ordinary American in a middle-class suburb. Lazarenko showed no desire to return to Ukraine, despite the entourage of Yanukovych offering him a guarantee of safe return in exchange for testimony against Tymoshenko.

The Green Party of Ukraine – The Harbinger of Zelensky's Future Victory

The scale of Lazarenko's activities showed that Ukrainian corruption had evolved beyond the usual bribery. Unlike the Soviet era, officials and deputies now had an unprecedented opportunity to distribute state funds in the interest of private business. This also opened wide horizons for lobbying their interests in the privatization of state property. The question was only how to obtain a state position that gives access to corrupt enrichment.

From the mid-90s, businessmen of various levels began to show a keen interest in obtaining a parliamentary mandate. This first became evident in the 1998 parliamentary elections. The range of participants in this electoral campaign was so wide that it included a party which, unlike the others, did not declare a clear stance on the main political issues and focused on the youth. This was the Green Party of Ukraine (GPU).

Political technologists, researching electoral preferences for their clients, found that a significant number of voters were tired of politics. Theoretically, this gave an opportunity to get a new party into the Verkhovna Rada, positioning itself against both leftist politicians and national patriots. In simple terms, there was a great opportunity to

monetize the protest and apolitical electorate.

The electoral campaign of the Green Party of Ukraine was in many ways similar to Zelensky's campaign. The main slogan was based on the anti-elitist template "Politicians engage in demagoguery," which populists often use in various forms. Since the GPU's target electoral base was the youth, bright advertising spots were broadcast on television channels, contrasting "greens" with systemic politicians. Also, concerts of the popular rock band "Scriabin" took place in many cities of Ukraine in support of the party, under the slogan "Preserve nature for life."

The results of the 1998 elections showed that the calculation was correct. Apolitical and protest voters fell for the technology used for the first time. More than 1.44 million Ukrainians or 5.43% of all voters voted for the GPU. The "Greens" sent 19 deputies to the parliament, more than half of whom (10 deputies) turned out to be representatives of big business. It adds a particular piquancy that two of these ten deputies were involved in the trade of oil products, that is, they hardly fought for the environment, quite the contrary.

The success of the Green Party showed that even apolitical voters could be attracted to one's side by offering them situational projects that match their interests or beliefs. However, subsequent attempts to do something similar ended in failure. In 2002, the pro-government party "Women for the Future" failed to overcome the 4-percent barrier to enter parliament. A similar result that year was shown by the political project "Winter Generation Committee," which targeted representatives of small and medium-sized businesses.

The GPU was the only successful populist project until Zelensky appeared. Having entered parliament, the greens did not show any achievements there, and their popularity gradually faded. This is unsurprising, as most of their faction came to lobby their own business interests, not to fight for the environment. In the next 2002 elections, the Green Party of Ukraine failed to overcome the 4-percent barrier.

The Elimination of the "Against All" Option

In the early years of independence, Ukrainians had high hopes for the future. Indeed, in 1990, Ukraine and Poland were at a similar starting point. The standard of living in both countries was almost

identical. Ukraine even had an advantage in the form of a more developed industry.

However, the situation unfolded according to different scenarios. Delaying market reforms did not allow Ukraine to realize its industrial potential. The financial system collapsed. In 1993-1994, the country broke the world record for hyperinflation. Part of the population, facing unemployment and a decline in living standards, began to look for work in Central and Western European countries. By 1995, the situation in the economy began to stabilize, but citizens' dissatisfaction remained high.

Mass protests by Donbas miners, who for several months in 1993 were not paid their salaries, led to the snap presidential elections in 1994, which replaced the moderate but indecisive Leonid Kravchuk with the "red director" Leonid Kuchma. The first five-year term of this president was remembered for the monetary reform (the hryvnia finally appeared in circulation instead of the devalued coupon), the stabilization of the financial system, and the start of the privatization of large enterprises. However, it later turned out that several metallurgical plants were almost given away to Kuchma's son-in-law — the future oligarch and owner of several TV channels, Viktor Pinchuk.

In the 90s, one form of citizens' dissatisfaction was the emergence of the protest electorate. It was thanks to these voters that Kuchma was able to defeat the incumbent president Kravchuk. However, political technologists were concerned by the fact that a significant portion of the citizens participating in the elections marked the "Against All" option. Thus, their votes were not counted in favor of any candidate.

Political technologists of the Green Party of Ukraine managed to deceive the dissatisfied. The success of this political project showed that thanks to promises and manipulations, it is possible to make even those who believe they are outside of politics vote. But the share of those who continued to vote against all remained quite significant.

For example, in the second round of the 1999 presidential elections, when the head of state was chosen between Leonid Kuchma and the leader of the communists Petro Symonenko, almost a million voters (970 thousand) did not support any candidate. In 2004, in the epic battle between Viktor Yushchenko and Viktor Yanukovych, the "Against All" option was marked by 2.34% of voters or almost 700 thousand people. In the repeat voting in the 2010 presidential

election, when Yulia Tymoshenko and Viktor Yanukovych made it to the second round, more than 1.1 million voters, or 4.36%, did not support any candidate. A similar result was observed in the parliamentary elections.

The situation, in which precious votes for each candidate were wasted, greatly concerned politicians. Ideally, the protest electorate should be distributed among situational projects, where each voter should choose their "green party." However, except for 1998, it turned out to be very difficult to implement such a scenario. This was proven by the failure of political projects "Women for the Future" and "Winter Generation Committee."

In 2011, the entourage of President Yanukovych decided to remove the "Against All" option from the electoral ballots. The 2012 parliamentary elections were considered very important for the Party of Regions, and experts likely found that the abolition of this option would more likely benefit the ruling party rather than the opposition. Either way, the decision to remove the option to vote "Against All" from the ballot had significant consequences not only in 2012 but also in the upcoming victory of Volodymyr Zelensky.

The option "I do not support any candidate" was chosen not only by protest voters but also by those who preferred non-systemic politicians – showmen and populists, such as Volodymyr Zelensky. If this option had remained in the 2019 elections, Zelensky would, of course, still have won. But his victory would not have been so overwhelming, with 73% support. Because the absolute majority of those who once voted "Against All" found their candidate – a person who mocked politicians and their parties from the stage.

Andriy Danilko Could Have Been in Zelensky's Place

The failed political career of singer and showman Andriy Danilko, known nationwide by his stage pseudonym Verka Serduchka, is one of the most mysterious stories in Ukrainian politics. It was first discussed in the summer of 2007, before the start of registration for snap parliamentary elections. At that time, Danilko mentioned in an interview his desire to register for the elections at the head of his party. He even said he planned to organize a pre-election block called "Against All," and overall, he was no worse than other MPs because he could fight and shout in the Verkhovna Rada better than them.

The results of closed public opinion polls showed that if Danilko actually went to the elections, practically having a deputy's certificate was in his pocket. Moreover, he would bring at least 18-20 deputies into parliament on his coattails. This could significantly influence important issues such as forming a coalition and voting for the budget.

However, a few days later, Danilko announced that he had given up the idea of getting into politics. He did not explain the reason. Given the artist's flamboyant image, this whole story was considered a joke.

Later, information emerged that someone from President Yushchenko's administration (likely Viktor Baloha) met with Andriy Danilko and convinced the showman not to participate in the elections. The arguments made by the head of the administration remained a secret. It's possible that there was some financial incentive.

If Danilko had become a deputy and the head of a parliamentary party in 2007, Ukrainian society would have received a vaccine that could have protected the country from Zelensky's victory and all the consequences of this disaster. Most likely, having entered parliament, the singer and comedian Danilko would have followed the path of the Green Party of Ukraine. And ultimately, voters would have been disappointed not only in him but also in all non-systemic politicians from show business. But, unfortunately, this did not happen.

Interestingly, on the eve of the pivotal 2019 elections, Andriy Danilko again remembered his possible participation in the elections. According to journalist Olesya Batsman, a year before the elections, the singer was persuaded to run for president: "A lot of people persuaded him. They came from different forces, from different parties, promised very big money."

Who these people were who persuaded Danilko remains unknown. Since many knew about Zelensky's preparation for participation in the elections since 2017, the appearance of another apolitical showman in the presidential elections could have worsened the comedian's chances. Zelensky and Danilko were on the same electoral field. Therefore, in a hypothetical first round of elections, they would have simply taken votes from each other.

Leonid Chernovetsky – The Most Famous

Ukrainian Populist Before Zelensky

Excluding proponents of radically left ideas, such as Natalia Vitrenko, there were only two well-known populists in Ukrainian politics before Zelensky: Leonid Chernovetsky and Oleh Lyashko. It's probably not worth including Yulia Tymoshenko in this list. Indeed, she utilized some elements of left-wing populism, promising, for example, to provide all the population, regardless of income level, with cheap gas. But in other respects, Tymoshenko was quite rational and even moderate. The years she led the Ukrainian government cannot be called a failure. On the contrary: the economic indicators were quite stable.

Unlike Yulia Tymoshenko, the leader of the Radical Party, Oleh Lyashko, can confidently be called a true, classic populist. His rhetoric included a whole bouquet of various promises, not supported by any economic rationale. Lyashko promised to "bring a cow back to every home," raise pensions and simultaneously reduce gas prices, restore Ukraine's status as a nuclear power, and enter a monastery if he failed to fulfill all the points of his party's pre-election program.

However, Oleh Lyashko and Volodymyr Zelensky have little in common. Lyashko's populism was aimed primarily at the rural audience, so his rhetoric sounded a bit rough. But he often used funny impromptus, which attracted public attention. Zelensky operated differently before an audience, according to a carefully prepared script, aimed at a broad mass of voters. Unexpected impromptus in his speech, if they occurred, looked extremely awkward.

The closest to Zelensky can be called the former mayor of Kyiv, Leonid Chernovetsky – an experienced populist and the hero of numerous jokes. Despite millions of Ukrainians laughing at Chernovetsky, it did not prevent him from winning the Kyiv mayor's election twice. Like Zelensky, Chernovetsky gained nationwide popularity thanks to television. In the months leading up to the 2006 Kyiv mayoral election, he regularly appeared as a guest on various political talk shows. Half Russian, half Jewish, Chernovetsky positioned himself as a devout Christian Evangelist, an experienced banker, philanthropist, and defender of the underprivileged. Leonid Chernovetsky always ended his TV appearances by urging viewers to call their moms, "because you probably haven't talked to them for a while, and they've missed you."

In addition to spiritual nourishment, potential voters were offered material benefits. At least two years before the election,

Chernovetsky's team began regularly distributing small food packages worth 5-10 dollars to tens of thousands of Kyiv pensioners. At that time, Ukrainian legislation did not prohibit politicians from "feeding" their electorate.

Like all populists, before the election, Chernovetsky offered Kyiv citizens a wide range of promises that would surely come true after his victory. He promised not to raise fares for public transport and utility tariffs, to perform quality repairs of almost all 10,400 capital's apartment buildings, to complete the construction of a bridge to the distant Troieschyna district by 2010, and to double the city budget's revenues. Of course, none of this was ever fulfilled.

However, Chernovetsky did not forget to do something else. During his tenure as Kyiv's mayor, the city lost a significant amount of land, which was initially almost freely transferred to front men and then ended up under the control of Chernovetsky's son-in-law – Vyacheslav Suprunenko.

Suprunenko also gained control over the most valuable assets of the municipal construction holding "Kyivmiskbud". This scheme was so large-scale that in 2011, the entourage of the new president, Viktor Yanukovych, demanded Suprunenko and Chernovetsky to immediately return the stolen assets.

With Yanukovych's rise to power, Chernovetsky's political career began to fade. He lost the desire to appear on talk shows and no longer advised viewers to "call mom". Kyiv was always considered a very valuable asset among politicians, so it's not surprising that Yanukovych almost immediately wanted to put his own person at the head of the capital. And since Chernovetsky was long considered one of the country's biggest corrupt officials, he was made an offer he couldn't refuse. In July 2010, the Kyiv mayor left the country for a vacation, from which he somehow did not want to return.

The Party of Regions always had low popularity in Kyiv, so they were unlikely to have a chance to win the mayor's election. For this reason, after Chernovetsky's flight, Yanukovych's team decided to put the elections on pause. By presidential decree, the capital was "temporarily" headed by the inconspicuous Olexandr Popov – a member of the Party of Regions, former mayor of the small town of Komsomolsk (now called Horishni Plavni). Popov served as acting mayor of Kyiv for almost three years until the start of the second Maidan.

As for Chernovetsky's further fate, after several months of

vacationing abroad, he ended up in Tbilisi, where he took Georgian citizenship and gradually began to engage in local politics. Hoping to repeat his success, Chernovetsky even registered a political party "Happy Georgia". However, he did not gain significant popularity among Georgian voters.

In 2018, fearing that the Georgian authorities would extradite him to Ukraine, Leonid Chernovetsky left Tbilisi. According to the latest data, the former mayor of Kyiv lives in Tel Aviv and actively comments on Ukrainian politics on social networks. His son Stepan owns one of the largest streaming services in Eastern Europe, MEGOGO. Despite several criminal cases, the Chernovetsky family still owns many assets in Ukraine.

It should be added that in March 2022, after the start of the full-scale war, Leonid Chernovetsky effectively sided with Russia. On his Facebook, he wrote that Russia bombs exclusively military targets only so that Ukrainian military would not "take over Luhansk and Donetsk". However, a few weeks later, after the massacre in Bucha and the death of thousands of civilians in Mariupol, Chernovetsky stopped writing about the war and requalified as a religious expert.

Kolomoisky Enters the Media Market

How did Volodymyr Zelensky manage to transform from a television comedian into the head of state? The answer to this question can be found in the history of his patron – one of the most ruthless and greedy oligarchs in Ukraine. Ihor Kolomoisky not only provided the media resource for Zelensky's victory. Without a doubt, it was he who initiated this foray into politics. Zelensky was merely a tool in the conflict between Kolomoisky and President Poroshenko. It must be acknowledged, a very effective one.

For many years, Ihor Kolomoisky did not have a significant influence on the media. Under Kuchma, he did not need it. Despite some conflicts that occurred from time to time with other major Ukrainian businessmen (Hryhoryshyn, Pinchuk, Surkis), his business was doing well. Kolomoisky demonstrated complete loyalty to President Kuchma, backed up by generous bribes. In Ukraine, this was enough for a peaceful life and the absence of claims from law enforcement agencies.

As Ihor Valeriyovych Kolomoisky later recounted, he paid Kuchma

\$5 million every month. This was the fee for "using" the state company "Ukrnafta". The majority share of this largest oil refining company in Ukraine belonged to the state. Kolomoisky, through companies affiliated with him, was a minority shareholder. For \$5 million a month, he was allowed to put his management in "Ukrnafta". As a result of this agreement, the company's balance showed losses or minimal profit year after year. The main dividends were received by Kolomoisky's companies. "Ukrnafta's" management signed unfavorable contracts with them, and the government, the Accounting Chamber, and the State Property Fund turned a blind eye to this.

At the end of 2004, radical changes occurred in Ukraine. Kuchma's plan to transfer power to his successor (leader of the Donetsk clan, Viktor Yanukovych) failed. After the election fraud, the "Orange Revolution" also known as "the first Maidan" began. Under pressure from massive protest actions, the Supreme Court canceled the results of the second round of elections. An additional third round was appointed, in which the leader of the democratic opposition, Viktor Yushchenko, won.

With Yushchenko's rise to power, Ihor Kolomoisky felt the need for media protection. At first glance, he still had no conflicts with the new authority. Yushchenko proved to be a weak, initiative-less president who failed to implement any significant reforms during his term. Kolomoisky retained control over "Ukrnafta" and continued to successfully milk it. However, he felt the situation was quite unstable. Only owning a nationwide TV channel could make Kolomoisky and his assets untouchable from any encroachments: both from other oligarchs and from Yushchenko's team (Baloha, Tretiakov, Poroshenko).

In August 2005, Ihor Kolomoisky bought 40% of the shares of the TV channel "1 + 1" for 100 million dollars from its owners: Boris Fuksman and Olexandr Rodnyansky. Interestingly, before signing the contract for the sale of the channel, Rodnyansky significantly strengthened his security. Although Kolomoisky did not have a vivid criminal past like Yanukovych and Akhmetov, he had long been trailed by the reputation of a successful corporate raider. Therefore, the co-owner of the channel's precautions were not superfluous.

After selling "1 + 1", Rodnyansky moved to Moscow and after some time became a well-known Russian film producer. However, after the start of the full-scale war in 2022, he left Russia, returned to Kyiv, and almost immediately became an advisor to President Volodymyr Zelensky.

In August 2005, after buying the channel, Kolomoisky told in an interview with "Dzerkalo Tyzhnia" that the president's assistant, Olexandr Tretiakov, tried to dissuade him from this deal.

"There were no threats or harsh warnings in that conversation. There was just a phrase like: 'Why do you need this, you are businessmen, you have never been involved in politics,'" the oligarch recalled. Kolomoisky then assured Tretiakov that buying shares in "1 + 1" was "business and there is no politics here."

As it turned out, this formal answer had epochal significance for the history of modern Ukraine. The transition of the "1 + 1" channel under the control of the owner of "PrivatBank" completed the redistribution of the television market in favor of oligarchs. From this moment on, the formation of public opinion of Ukrainian voters was handled by four media holdings:

- **Starlight Media** (channels ICTV, "Novy", STB) – owner Viktor Pinchuk (metallurgy, telecommunications business, Kuchma's son-in-law).
- **Inter Media Group** (channel "Inter") – nominal owner businessman and politician Valeriy Khoroshkovsky, later the media group came under the control of gas oligarch Dmytro Firtash.
- **1 + 1 Media** (channel "1 + 1") – owner Ihor Kolomoisky (financial-industrial group "Privat").
- **TRK "Ukraine"** – owner Donetsk oligarch Rinat Akhmetov (metallurgy, coal mining, energy, telecommunications).

Also, several niche news channels with a small audience were broadcasting: "5 kanal", "Pryamyi", 24 kanal, and "NBM" (later "Espresso" appeared based on it). The first two channels were owned by Petro Poroshenko, future President of Ukraine. He could also be called an oligarch since he actively combined politics with business and influenced the media market.

Meeting with Zelensky

According to Kolomoisky, he met the future president at some party in 2008 or 2009, where Zelensky was a guest, not performing in his usual role as a variety show comedian. A few years later, their acquaintance evolved into a business relationship. Starting in 2012,

the variety show "Evening Kvartal" began to air in prime time on Saturday on Kolomoisky's channel. In return, Zelensky received a portion of the advertising revenue from the channel.

It is not known for certain what level of relationship they maintained with each other until 2015. It was unlikely to be a friendship because they were people of different statuses. However, in all interviews, Kolomoisky always spoke of Zelensky with the utmost affection.

In 2021, following the leak of the Pandora Papers, it was revealed that several of Zelensky's companies received almost \$40 million from Kolomoisky as payment for television content. To minimize taxes, the money was routed through offshore companies.

Some journalists speculated that Zelensky's offshore accounts could have been used by Kolomoisky to siphon money from PrivatBank. As is known, in 2016, the bank was nationalized by the state due to capitalization issues. But before that, Kolomoisky had extracted almost all of its liquid capital by issuing unsecured loans to shell companies.

The idea that Zelensky could have been involved in this scheme seems unlikely. The sum of \$40 million fits well into the scale of the years-long collaboration between "Kvartal 95" and the "1 + 1" channel. It's important to remember that the "Evening Kvartal" show aired on Saturday evening when advertising time is most expensive.

Poroshenko Makes a Fatal Mistake

On March 2, 2014, Acting President of Ukraine Oleksandr Turchynov appointed Ihor Kolomoisky as the head of Dnipropetrovsk Regional State Administration. Turchynov's calculation was fundamentally correct. After President Yanukovych's flight and the complete collapse of central authority, the country needed to be stabilized. Regional leaders – the most influential and wealthy people – were best suited for this. At that time, with the support of the Russian army, Crimea was being annexed. Unable to resist Putin in Crimea, Kyiv politicians feared a similar scenario in other regions.

In the spring of 2014, the interests of the Ukrainian state and oligarch Kolomoisky coincided. The oligarch feared that Putin, by capturing Ukraine, would seize his assets. But on March 3, the day after his appointment as governor, Kolomoisky, who always loved to speak publicly, made a mistake. During a TV interview, he called

Putin a schizophrenic who wanted to revive the USSR or the Russian Empire. Understandably, after these statements, Kolomoisky became one of the main enemies of Russian propaganda. Later, the oligarch softened his rhetoric towards Putin and avoided harsh statements against him, even in 2022, following the full-scale invasion.

It must be acknowledged, but Kolomoisky quickly managed to establish order in the region entrusted to him. Pro-Russian forces and their leaders in Dnipropetrovsk were neutralized. How this was done was of little concern to anyone. Some were bought off, some were forced to flee the country through threats, and others disappeared into the unknown. Kolomoisky and his subordinates were such a powerful and influential force in Dnipropetrovsk Region that none of the pro-Russian forces dared to oppose them. Even the Vilkul family, the first of whom was the mayor of Kryvyi Rih and the second of whom headed the region for some time under Yanukovych.

Yes, in 2014, Kolomoisky saved Dnipropetrovsk Region from the "Russian world", which he always proudly recalls. Losing Dnipropetrovsk could have detached several regions from Ukraine, at least Zaporizhzhia. But, fortunately, this did not happen.

In neighboring Donbas, the situation developed more dramatically. In March 2014, Turchynov offered Ukraine's richest man – oligarch Rinat Akhmetov – to head Donetsk Region, but he refused. Given his influence in the region, he could have easily resisted pro-Russian forces, which at that time were at the stage of street rallies and the seizure of local administration buildings. Akhmetov erroneously believed that these protests could be controlled and would soon end. However, the situation quickly escalated into a military conflict, and Akhmetov lost almost all of his enterprises and mines in the part of Donbas controlled by the Russians.

Two months after the annexation of Crimea, in May 2014, it became clear that the fight against Russian hybrid aggression would be limited to Donbas only. In Odesa, Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, and Dnipropetrovsk, the situation was stabilized. Kolomoisky continued to head the region entrusted to him, but it was clear that he was not very interested in it. He spent most of his time not in Dnipropetrovsk but in Kyiv or with his family in Geneva. The actual leaders of the region were two of the governor's deputies – the well-known corporate raider from Kolomoisky's group, Hennadiy Korban, and his friend, the future mayor of Dnipro (the new name of Dnipropetrovsk since 2016), Borys Filatov.

It is worth noting that several years later, when Korban and Filatov broke off relations with Kolomoisky and left his influence, they both encountered problems at the presidential level. Violating the Constitution, Zelensky stripped Korban of Ukrainian citizenship and banned him from returning to Ukraine. Filatov was repeatedly on the verge of being removed from the position of city mayor.

While serving as the head of Dnipropetrovsk Region, Ihor Kolomoisky significantly expanded his activities. Previously, during Yanukovych's time, he behaved quite cautiously, fearing that the president's son, Oleksandr, also known as "Sasha the dentist," might try to take away some of his assets. But after the events of 2014 and the successful neutralization of the "Russian world", Kolomoisky began to act more brazenly. Apparently, he believed that his reward should be a portion of state assets.

In early 2015, tensions arose between Ihor Kolomoisky and the new president, Petro Poroshenko. The oligarch, who had controlled the state-owned company "Ukrtransnafta" since 2009, through his business partner Oleksandr Lazorko, proposed to pump out 675,000 tons of technological oil from the main oil pipeline. At that time, due to military actions in Donbas, this pipeline was not used for its intended purpose, and there was a risk that pro-Russian militants could pump oil from the pipeline in their area.

After some time, "Ukrtransnafta" emptied the pipeline and left the pumped oil in storage facilities controlled by Ihor Kolomoisky's "Privat" group. Then, the oligarch's structures doubled the storage tariff. As a result of this cunning scheme, the state had to pay Kolomoisky 2.5 million hryvnias or about \$100,000 every day for storing its oil.

On March 13, 2015, Energy Minister Volodymyr Demchyshyn initiated the dismissal of the chairman of the board of the joint-stock company "Ukrtransnafta," Oleksandr Lazorko, for exceeding storage costs of technological oil at the "Privat" group's facilities. On March 19, the dismissal was approved at a meeting of the company's Supervisory Board.

Ihor Kolomoisky reacted extremely negatively to the news of his appointee's dismissal from the state company. Firstly, Lazorko refused to comply with the Supervisory Board's decision and barricaded himself in his office. Secondly, on the evening of the same day, March 19, Ihor Kolomoisky himself arrived at the head office of "Ukrtransnafta" with dozens of armed men. For Ukraine, this looked

like a typical scenario of a corporate raider attack. The only difference was that the armed men were brought to the company's office by the head of Dnipropetrovsk Region.

According to the chairman of the Supervisory Board of "Ukrtransnafta," Oleksandr Savchenko, who witnessed all these events, Kolomoisky threatened that "he has 2000 fighters, and tomorrow they will all be in Kyiv because his companies are being taken away."

The story with "Ukrtransnafta" seemed so wild that Poroshenko decided to end it with a radical solution – the dismissal of Kolomoisky as the head of Dnipropetrovsk Region. It was not just about this episode, of course. Kolomoisky began to behave not only as a thief of state property but also as a powerful political player. However, there was one nuance: his capabilities were then limited by the lack of his own faction in parliament.

On March 25, 2015, six days after the events at the "Ukrtransnafta" office, Poroshenko dismissed Kolomoisky. According to the official formulation, the governor himself wrote a resignation letter, although the initiative came from the president.

Before announcing the dismissal, Poroshenko and Kolomoisky had a lengthy meeting. As it turned out later, the main topic of the conversation was "peaceful coexistence" between them after the dismissal. According to unofficial information, Poroshenko promised Kolomoisky not to touch his business interests and not to prosecute Lazorko, who, by his actions, had earned at least several years in prison. Indeed, after that, the former head of "Ukrtransnafta" quietly left for London, and Ukrainian law enforcement did not put him on the international wanted list. In turn, Kolomoisky promised the president not to go into opposition to the current government "for the sake of peace in Ukraine."

By firing the thieving oligarch from a high government position, Poroshenko did what any head of state would have done. At least if we're talking about civilized countries. But at the same time, the Ukrainian president made a fatal mistake, as it turned out later. He left Kolomoisky with a terrifying weapon in his hands – a nationwide TV channel, with which the oligarch could shape public opinion.

Putin went through something similar in 2000. And unlike Poroshenko, he knew exactly that enemies should not be left with weapons. First, he took away the control of the most popular TV channel in the country, ORT, from oligarch Berezovsky, then forced oligarch Gusinsky to sell another nationwide channel – NTV – to the

state-owned "Gazprom." Before 2000, Berezovsky and Gusinsky naively believed that their influence on the media was enough to create problems for Putin and limit his influence. It turned out that a criminal case against the owner of a TV channel could quickly and effectively neutralize both the television killer Sergey Dorenko on ORT and the thoughtful analyst Yevgeny Kiselyov on NTV, and all other journalists.

Poroshenko did not understand this. He hoped for a truce because he was promised by a fraudster who had spent most of his adult life robbing state enterprises. As it turned out, the dismissal of Kolomoisky triggered a series of events that led to the victory of stage comedian Zelensky in the presidential elections.

Lyashko, Avakov, and a President on Shaky Ground

Could Poroshenko effectively oppose Kolomoisky? We will discuss this in more detail later, but for now, let's consider the power system of those times. Ukraine in 2014-2019 was still a country with a high level of corruption. However, the scale of state budget embezzlements during Poroshenko's time was much smaller than under the previous president, Yanukovych, who after his flight to Russia left the country with virtually an empty budget.

Before the 2019 elections, Petro Poroshenko's opponents accused him of failing to eradicate corruption. Moreover, the president's associates, Ihor Kononenko and Oleksandr Hranovskyi, were suspected of being involved in scams in the energy sector and embezzlements at the chemical Odesa Port Plant.

Indeed, this plant had always been a cash cow for any president without exception, from Kuchma to Zelensky. Since the Odesa Port Plant was state-owned, its managers, in agreement with Kyiv, regularly concocted various cunning schemes, as a result of which the plant earned minimal profit, and the commercial partner – the maximum. Every president, having this huge generator of black cash, stubbornly did not want to privatize the Odesa Port Plant. It remains state-owned to this day. And as you can understand, if the OPP brings in revenues, they definitely do not go to the state budget.

Interestingly, after the change of power, the Office of President Zelensky and the officials subordinate to him from the Prosecutor

General's Office, the State Bureau of Investigations, and the SBU have not been able to find any criminal activity on Poroshenko. Despite the obvious fact that Zelensky hates his predecessor, no corruption was found in his actions. But for Ukrainian anti-corruption activists and journalists, it was enough that Poroshenko couldn't or didn't want to make Ukraine free from corruption. It all ended with the absolute majority of corruption fighters deciding to make an infantile protest in the spirit of an offended 16-year-old schoolboy. Ignoring the professional qualities of presidential candidates, they voted for an incompetent populist associated with Ukraine's most dangerous oligarch.

Poroshenko did not eradicate corruption for two reasons. Firstly, he did not have enough MPs to change legislation. Secondly, he did not have a strong desire to do so. Like every president before and after him, instead of destroying the judicial mafia, it was much more convenient for Poroshenko to manually negotiate this or that court decision. While he held the presidency, most judges heeded the advice of his Administration officials. And Poroshenko was satisfied with this.

The fundamental basis of Ukrainian corruption is the impunity of judges, which allows them to issue unlawful judicial decisions in favor of interested parties. This problem can only be solved by changing the Constitution. It turned out that the judicial branch of power in Ukraine is incapable of self-purification through control by the High Council of Justice. Fighting corruption in the judiciary is only possible by abolishing judges' immunity and holding them criminally responsible for issuing illegal decisions. For this, the president or other initiators of constitutional change need to have not just a majority (226 MPs) in parliament, but a constitutional majority (300 MPs).

The parliamentary majority, which theoretically should have supported Poroshenko's reforms, was a shaky construction created from the pro-presidential party "Petro Poroshenko Block" (132 MPs) and the "People's Front" party (82 MPs).

Other factions that joined the coalition at the beginning of the work of the 8th convocation of the Verkhovna Rada (2014 – 2019) left it after a year and a half. First, the faction of the Radical Party of Oleh Lyashko fell off, then "Batkivshchyna" of Yulia Tymoshenko and "Self Reliance" of Lviv Mayor Andriy Sadovyi. Since 2016, the pro-presidential coalition had the minimum number of deputies. During important votes, parliamentary votes had to be bought periodically. Such are the realities of Ukrainian politics.

For example, in December 2016, the coalition lacked votes to pass the budget for the next year. The faction of the Radical Party, which had already left the coalition by that time, kindly agreed to support this vote. However, it turned out that for this, the head of the faction, Oleh Lyashko, requested the inclusion in the budget of an allocation of 600 million hryvnias (about \$25 million) for the purchase of fire trucks at the "Pozhmashina" factory in Chernihiv region. This factory belonged to the head of the local branch of the Radical Party. Two years earlier, Lyashko had already lobbied for the purchase of fire trucks at the same enterprise, but then the amount was three times less – only 200 million hryvnias. Similar lobbying schemes worked with other factions and individual MPs.

Like Zelensky, the leader of the Radical Party, Oleh Lyashko, was a populist, easily giving voters the most diverse promises. An interesting fact from his biography: in the early 90s, Lyashko was convicted of fraud. He spent several years in prison and was released under the 1996 amnesty on the occasion of the adoption of the Constitution and the 5th anniversary of Ukraine's Independence.

The difference between Lyashko and Zelensky was felt in the scale of the electoral base. If Zelensky managed to unite around himself maximally wide layers of the population from almost all regions of the country, then Lyashko mainly focused on poorly educated rural voters of the Central part of Ukraine. As a result, the more powerful populist project "Servant of the People" by Zelensky absorbed the electorate of the Radical Party. In the snap elections of 2019, Oleh Lyashko's party did not overcome the 5-percent barrier to enter parliament.

Due to the constant lack of deputies to adopt the necessary bills, the "People's Front" faction received a golden share. Almost everything depended on the position of its leadership: Oleksandr Turchynov (Chairman of the Security Council, acting President in 2014), Arseniy Yatsenyuk (Prime Minister 2014-2016), and Arsen Avakov (Minister of Internal Affairs 2014-2021). Poroshenko had serious problems with the latter, especially towards the end of his five-year presidential term.

Avakov almost openly worked against Poroshenko and coordinated his actions with Kolomoisky. For example, in the winter of 2019, during the election campaign, the police, led by Avakov, covered groups of "activists" from the "National Militia" (the civilian division of "Azov"), who traveled from city to city committing hooligan actions at meetings involving the president.

The reason for the conflict between Avakov and Poroshenko dates back to 2015 when the minister's son was accused of corruption. In February 2015, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, headed by Arsen Avakov, decided to order 5,000 backpacks from his son's company at prices significantly higher than market ones. This classic corruption scheme could have gone unnoticed, but after some time, Ukrainian media published a video made by a hidden camera, where the younger Avakov in the office of his father's deputy, Serhiy Chebotar, discussed the details of the backpack purchase.

After the video made noise on social networks, a criminal case was initiated against Olexandr Avakov, and his property was seized. But after a three-year investigation, the case ended in nothing and did not even reach the court. The seizure of the minister's son's property was lifted, and he continued to live a normal life, not spending a single night in a detention center. Nonetheless, Avakov Sr. blamed President Poroshenko for his son's problems. In his opinion, Poroshenko could have stopped the case at the very beginning but did not want to do so. Arsen Avakov remained in office but harbored a great grudge against the president.

Perhaps the most eloquent description of Poroshenko's political weakness is the fact that he could not fire Avakov from the position of head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, although he theoretically had such an opportunity. Considering that Avakov was one of the leaders of the People's Front, this would automatically destroy the coalition. After early elections, the prime minister could become a person much less loyal to the president than Yatsenyuk.

And the last stroke to the portrait of Avakov and his role in this whole story. After Zelensky's victory, Kolomoisky was in euphoria for some time, so he willingly gave frank interviews. In one of them, the scandalous oligarch stated that "Zelensky is our common victory with Avakov."

Kolomoisky Declares War on Poroshenko

The conflict surrounding "Ukrtransnafta" might have been considered exhausted if Poroshenko hadn't touched upon Kolomoisky's interests in the banking sector. PrivatBank, which was 92% owned by Kolomoisky and his business partner Gennadiy Bogolyubov, was the largest Ukrainian bank. More than half of the adult population in Ukraine had accounts there. However, in 2015, the bank faced a

minor issue.

The tripling depreciation of the national currency, following Yanukovych's flight and the onset of war in Donbas, severely impacted the banking system. To avoid uncontrollable bank bankruptcies, the state regulator began cleaning up the financial market in 2015. During the year, 33 banks, which had almost no assets or were involved in money laundering schemes, lost their licenses. The National Bank also increased the reserve requirements for commercial banks.

An audit of PrivatBank revealed that it not only significantly exceeded the norm of insider loans (the bank loaned customer funds to Kolomoisky's companies) but also needed recapitalization amounting to 113 billion hryvnias (about \$5 billion). As of January 1, 2016, more than 80% of all PrivatBank's loans were issued to companies affiliated with Kolomoisky. The absolute majority of these companies were shell companies without liquid assets for collateral.

The bank's owners had 1.5 years to meet the regulator's requirements. As Valeriya Gontareva, the former head of the National Bank of Ukraine (NBU), recalls, not much money was needed – about 3-4 billion hryvnias (\$150-180 million). The main requirement of the National Bank was the re-registration of issued loans from shell firms to real companies with liquid assets instead of air. By April 2016, real collaterals worth 31 billion hryvnias needed to be transferred to PrivatBank's balance sheet.

Instead of meeting the regulator's conditions, Kolomoisky maximally delayed the negotiations. According to Minister of Finance Oleksandr Danyliuk, the oligarch proposed the state to partially buy the bank, maintain the old management, and provide guarantees against criminal prosecution. He also asked for a few months to resolve the problems.

Eventually, it became clear that Kolomoisky was not intending to increase capitalization or bring in liquid assets as collateral for previously issued loans. On December 18, 2016, the NBU declared PrivatBank insolvent, on December 21, all 100% of the bank's shares were transferred to state ownership, and on December 23, a new management began work.

Three years later, explaining the reason for the nationalization of PrivatBank, Igor Kolomoisky blatantly lied. Since he couldn't admit that his bank issued insider loans to shell companies and lacked the necessary reserves, the oligarch concocted his version of events. According to him, Poroshenko nationalized the bank because he

wanted to control the "1 + 1" TV channel. But the president was mistaken, since PrivatBank owned a blocking stake in "1 + 1 Production," not the TV channel itself, which holds the license for television broadcasting.

The outcome of this whole story was that Kolomoisky harbored a significant grudge against Poroshenko and still accuses the former president of taking away his business. On the other hand, it's impossible to forget that the oligarch not only grossly violated the rules of conducting banking business but also never returned a large portion of the loans previously issued through PrivatBank, totaling more than \$5 billion. By the time of nationalization, this figure was roughly equivalent to the bank's value.

Why Zelensky?

It can be confidently asserted that already in 2016, Kolomoisky began preparing Zelensky for the presidential elections. The initial ideas about this emerged even in 2015 when the ratings of the first season of the TV series "Servant of the People" showed that Ukrainians very positively received the fairy tale about an honest history teacher who became president.

But why Zelensky specifically? From the perspective of political technologists, he was a very risky candidate. He was incompetent, had no experience in government, and had never held an elected position. Moreover, in his shows, he used sarcastic jokes regarding Ukraine as a state and mocked Ukrainians. For example, in September 2016, during a performance in Jurmala (Latvia), Zelensky compared Ukraine to an actress from German adult films, "ready to take it in any amount from any side."

It's noteworthy that almost all jokes in which Volodymyr Zelensky mocked Ukrainians on stage, while wearing their national costumes, were written by ethnic Russian Valeriy Zhidkov. A native of Russia's Tambov who moved to Kyiv in 2003, Zhidkov later began commenting on Ukrainian politics, expressing opposition to Ukraine's joining NATO and the European Union. A couple of years later, Zhidkov became an advisor to the head of the Security Service of Ukraine. This happened after the new head of state, Zelensky, appointed his childhood friend Ivan Bakanov as the head of the SBU. Zelensky and Bakanov lived in the same apartment building during their school years.

Considering all this, in a normal democratic society, Volodymyr Zelensky would never have become a presidential candidate. He would have been disqualified after the scandal in Jurmala. But in Ukraine, public opinion was shaped by TV channels owned by oligarchs. Journalists working on these channels were very good at sensing their employer's moods. Hence, there was no criticism of Zelensky on television; it did not reach the voters.

Social networks in Ukraine had a limited audience. Angry posts criticizing Zelensky were read by thousands or at best tens of thousands of Ukrainians. Meanwhile, nationwide TV channels covered a million-strong audience. Importantly, they influenced social groups to which critical posts on Facebook and Twitter simply did not reach: pensioners and housewives.

Logically, Zelensky was a very problematic presidential candidate. If Kolomoisky wanted to retaliate against Poroshenko, he should have chosen a more experienced candidate, who would have been easier to sell to voters as a real alternative to the incumbent president. However, the oligarch was so confident in his powers that he bet on the scandalous comedian becoming the country's president. Although, it's quite possible that he simply had no more suitable candidate to entrust with such a delicate job of overthrowing the detested Poroshenko and protecting his own business interests.

The level of communication between the oligarch and Zelensky at the time is indicated by the fact that, according to investigative journalists of the "Schemes" project, from February 2017 to the end of 2018, the comedian flew at least 13 times on private jets to Geneva and Tel Aviv, where Kolomoisky was then residing. In every second trip, he was accompanied by the oligarch's lawyer Andriy Bohdan, who later became the head of the President's Office. In December 2018, one of the trips included the head of the "Servant of the People" party Ivan Bakanov, the future head of the SBU. Sometimes Zelensky was accompanied by Kolomoisky's business partners: Gennadiy Bogolyubov, the Surkis brothers, Timur Mindich.

Kolomoisky's choice was likely emotional. He simply had a fondness for Zelensky. Possibly, the choice was influenced to some extent by the factor of nationality. Zelensky and Kolomoisky are both Jewish, as are the owners of two other nationwide TV channels: Viktor Pinchuk and Dmytro Firtash. During the election campaign, all three channels (1 + 1, ICTV, and Inter) in their news positively covered everything related to Zelensky. No criticism of the comedian.

No mention of his incompetence and populist promises.

From the perspective of the average Ukrainian, Volodymyr Zelensky's nationality was more of a minus than a plus. For centuries, the relationship between Ukrainians and Jews has been quite complicated. And anti-Semitism at the household level in Ukraine is still quite prevalent. Kolomoisky indeed took a risk by offering Ukrainian voters his protégé. But the main problem with Zelensky was not that he was Jewish but that he was completely unfit for the position he aspired to.

Vakarchuk, Who Could Have Spoiled Everything but Didn't

Representatives of show business and famous athletes have been involved in Ukrainian politics long before Zelensky. Back in 1998, the famous footballer Oleh Blokhin became a member of parliament, and in 2006, the Eurovision winner, singer Ruslana Lyzhychko, became a deputy of the Verkhovna Rada. A year later, in the snap elections of 2007, the leader of the rock band "Okean Elzy" Svyatoslav Vakarchuk entered the parliament.

Like the Green Party, non-system politicians from among athletes and musicians did not distinguish themselves and no one remembers their legislative initiatives. Blokhin caught the attention of journalists only because, during his parliamentary activity, he changed factions five times, even becoming a communist at one point. Ruslana Lyzhychko was in the Verkhovna Rada for just a year. In 2007, after the dissolution of the parliament, snap elections were announced in which she did not participate. Svyatoslav Vakarchuk, however, made an unconventional move: a year after receiving the deputy's certificate, he publicly announced his resignation.

Vakarchuk cited "continuous inter-party and intra-party disputes, which demoralize society within the country and undermine its authority" as the main reason for his resignation. He then delved into philosophy: "The only way to be oneself is to leave. Staying means running away for me."

Surprisingly, voters liked Vakarchuk's act. People understood it in the sense that the artist stands above political intrigues and was forced to leave politics to not participate in this dirt.

After resigning his deputy powers, Vakarchuk returned to his musical career, released several albums, and went on tour. He also periodically commented on political news on his Twitter in a somewhat lofty style, as if trying on the role of a spiritual leader. However, his philosophical statements appealed to voters. Over the years, Svyatoslav Vakarchuk has cultivated an image of an "honest patriot, sincerely concerned for Ukraine." And most importantly, in the eyes of a significant number of Ukrainians, he was considered a non-system politician, not like the others.

In September 2017, rumors began to circulate that Vakarchuk might return to politics. The news that the singer was going to Stanford as a visiting lecturer for the fall semester sparked this speculation. Simultaneously with lecturing, Vakarchuk was to study as part of the course "Development of Ukrainian Leaders."

As you can imagine, the title of this educational course worried many in Ukraine, primarily Kolomoisky and Zelensky, for whom the charismatic musician could shuffle all the cards. In case of his participation in the presidential elections, Vakarchuk could take many votes of the protest electorate, which Zelensky heavily counted on. Moreover, Svyatoslav Vakarchuk's popularity could altogether question Zelensky's victory.

After returning from America, Svyatoslav Vakarchuk began to be included in presidential ratings, although he publicly stated in April 2018 that he had no political ambitions. Despite this, the intrigue around the possible participation of the singer in the presidential election remained practically until the start of the election campaign.

In May-June 2019, after Zelensky's victory, Kolomoisky revealed in an interview that in March 2017, he and Zelensky, after having a little drink late at night, called Vakarchuk. According to the oligarch, they asked the singer if he was ready to support Zelensky in the presidential elections. Although, in reality, this duo was worried about something else: whether Vakarchuk himself would participate in the elections as a candidate for the highest office. During this conversation, Vakarchuk was sleepy and did not answer the question.

On June 26, 2018, sociological survey results showed that Zelensky and Vakarchuk had practically the same chances of winning. As for the incumbent president, Poroshenko had the highest anti-rating among the first-tier politicians.

Three days later, a worried Volodymyr Zelensky published an open video appeal to the leader of "Okean Elzy," Svyatoslav Vakarchuk, on

his Instagram. In it, the comedian publicly asked the musician if he was ready to join him.

Zelensky's concerns were entirely understandable. After a prolonged campaign to discredit Poroshenko, he no longer posed a danger to him, but Vakarchuk could spoil everything. Election modeling showed that the singer could realistically make it to the second round with Zelensky instead of Poroshenko. And if that happened, Vakarchuk would defeat Zelensky in the second round.

This whole story ended with Svyatoslav Vakarchuk not nominating himself for the presidential election and not supporting any candidate. However, three months after Zelensky's victory, the leader of "Okean Elzy" suddenly changed his mind and decided to return to politics after all. In the snap parliamentary elections in July 2019, Vakarchuk's party "Holos" received 5.82% of the voters' votes and brought 20 deputies into parliament.

This time, Vakarchuk lasted in parliament even less than a year. In June 2020, he decided again to resign from his deputy powers. He cited the desire to implement a "large educational project" as his reason for this decision. Politics, supposedly, only interfered with these plans. However, over the following four years, no one saw the "large educational project" of Svyatoslav Vakarchuk.

Pre-election Promises and Features of Zelensky's Electoral Campaign

Volodymyr Zelensky's electoral campaign started long before he registered as a presidential candidate. Starting from 2015, the Kolomoisky-owned TV channel "1 + 1" began a campaign to discredit the authorities. Unlike during Yanukovych's time, when journalists explained bad news with objective circumstances or mistakes by local officials, now the country's problems were more often attributed to mistakes or poor performance of the central government—the government, deputies, and the president.

An important role in discrediting Zelensky's main competitor was played by the entertainment show "Evening Kvartal". It aired every Saturday evening and always had high ratings. Before the 2019 presidential election, the premiere shows of "Evening Kvartal" were watched by 17.5% of the Ukrainian TV audience, several million viewers.

It is interesting to compare how Zelensky's show parodied presidents Yanukovych and Poroshenko during the times they both held the highest office in the country. Yanukovych was portrayed by the comedians of "Evening Kvartal" mainly as an uneducated man "from the people", who sometimes reads poorly or does not know something. In contrast, Poroshenko was depicted as an alcoholic and a corrupt official. The difference is not so hard to understand. If an illiterate person can evoke sympathy from the viewers, then a corrupt official, stealing the people's money, only evokes negative emotions.

Alongside discrediting Poroshenko, which lasted on "1 + 1" almost until the election day, political technologists started a PR campaign for Zelensky as a future candidate. A key role here was played by the TV series "Servant of the People". Volodymyr Zelensky portrayed an honest and poor history teacher who rides a bicycle and eventually becomes the President of Ukraine.

In any other country, such a series might have remained just a popular TV product, like, for example, "Game of Thrones", "The Walking Dead", or any other. But it's important to consider the specificity of the Ukrainian media market. By 2017, there was already an apparent consensus among oligarchs, who agreed with Kolomoisky's proposal to promote the television comedian Zelensky for president. Therefore, instead of leaving him in the realm of variety satire, journalists of oligarchic channels raced to discuss Volodymyr Zelensky's political future. This technology heated the society to the inevitability that the comedian would inevitably win the upcoming elections.

If you model a similar situation in the USA, just imagine that three nationwide channels (NBC, CBS, and ABC) regularly discuss the possibility of Kanye West running for president for a year and a half. They do not criticize the singer for his incompetence and scandalous statements. At the same time, they form an opinion among voters that only Kanye can save America from crisis. And finally, Kanye West wins the election.

Volodymyr Zelensky's official registration as a presidential candidate took place on January 21, 2019. From that moment, a new stage of his campaign began—two months of unrestrained populism and blatant lies. Following the populist tradition, the comedian positioned himself as a non-systemic candidate who rose against corrupt old politicians. However, he did not have a clear electoral program. There was only a set of vague theses that could be described

as "for all that's good and against all that's bad".

What did Zelensky promise? For example, in his program, he guaranteed that "a young family will have only one worry - to choose an apartment in the city or a country house", that in Ukraine "fireworks will be shot only at weddings and birthdays", that in the future there will be no ads for "Work in Poland", and in Poland, there will appear ads for "Work in Ukraine".

Zelensky also promised a wide application of popular referendums to pass laws, reducing utility tariffs for the underprivileged, zero tolerance for corruption at all levels, and assured that he is entering politics for only one term. What was missing in the program were explanations of the financial sources from which all these promises would be implemented.

The peak of lies by Zelensky could be seen on his pre-election billboards. One of them published a brilliant and simple phrase: "The end of the era of poverty on April 21, 2019". Another one stated: "Report a corrupt official - receive 10%". Obviously, all these were empty words. Ukrainians did not see any end of the era of poverty after Zelensky's victory. And there was not a single case when someone received 10% of the confiscated property from a corrupt official.

In his few polished interviews with pre-agreed questions, Volodymyr Zelensky presented voters with an ideally optimistic picture of the future. He would definitely end the war in Donbas because it's enough just to stop shooting. And in general, the war continues only because it benefits Petro Poroshenko.

He also promised to definitely sell all presidential planes, not to block roads with his motorcade, and to transfer state residences for children's summer camps. All these promises remained empty words. After Zelensky's victory, it turned out that presidential planes are needed because the head of state cannot be late. For the same reason, streets continued to be blocked before the president's motorcade passed. The transfer of official residences to children was partial – indeed, children live and rest in these country houses, but these are Zelensky's children.

For those who still doubted the comedian's competence, they prepared the slogan "it can't get worse". This promise was first made by Zelensky himself in Odesa on February 18, 2019. Later, after the elections, on May 7, 2019, the same saying that "it can't get worse" was repeated by Ihor Kolomoisky in an interview with the Bihus Info

project. He even frankly added that Volodymyr Zelensky's presidency is an experiment over the country.

The electoral campaign of the future president-comedian can be divided into three stages:

1. Discrediting the main competitor in the elections.
2. Creating an illusion around one's persona using the TV series "Servant of the People" and a favorable atmosphere in oligarchic media.
3. Distributing populist promises without explanations of how they can be implemented.

A feature of Zelensky's presidential campaign was that he was always protected from unexpected questions. He refused to appear on political talk shows and participate in debates in the traditional format. From the day of registering as a candidate until the day of voting, Zelensky gave only a couple of interviews to loyal journalists. No one, not even foreign journalists, could ask him a question that could compromise or show Zelensky in an unfavorable light.

Ukrainians did not choose a politician. They were presented with an illusion, unreal for any democratic country, in which voters elect as president of their country their favorite TV hero.

Did Poroshenko Have a Chance to Defeat Zelensky?

Surprisingly, Poroshenko had a good chance to remain president for a second term, even considering that Kolomoisky's media holding was actively working for Zelensky's victory. The problem was not in resources – the problem was in the wrongly chosen strategy.

The first reason why Poroshenko lost was that his information TV channels "Pryamiy" and "5 kanal" had low ratings. Once, during the first Maidan in 2004, "5 kanal" played a decisive role in delivering truthful information to Ukrainians. But since then, the popularity of channels that broadcast news and interviews around the clock had waned. Moreover, unlike in 2004, Poroshenko no longer had a monopoly on this television format. Alongside his channels, several other information channels were broadcasting in Ukraine: "112 Ukraine", "Espresso", NewsOne, and "NASH".

Simply put, there were too many news broadcasts, and Ukrainians

returned to the traditional entertainment format with TV shows, movies, and evening news. Poroshenko had time to change the situation. He could have purchased high-rating content from the West and create a major nationwide channel based on his two channels, which could compete with "1 + 1" and ICTV. However, the former president was for some reason fixated on information broadcasting and did not fully understand the power that high TV ratings gave his competitors.

Kolomoisky spent between \$50 million to \$100 million annually on "1 + 1". Poroshenko, whose wealth exceeded \$1 billion, was either not ready to spend such an amount or did not consider it reasonable. This was the first problem. It's impossible to win elections when your opponent has a multiple advantage in financial and media resources.

The second reason for Poroshenko's defeat was the incorrectly chosen electoral campaign strategy. He focused his activity on national-patriotic slogans. While generally correct for the country's development, they were, to put it delicately, not very relevant for many voters, especially in the South and East of Ukraine. In other words, Poroshenko couldn't reach a housewife from Mariupol with his ideas. Additionally, he lost the battle for the youth. His election rhetoric of "Army, Language, Faith" did not find enthusiasm among the youth, who, unlike in many other countries, are predominantly apolitical in Ukraine.

Petro Poroshenko could have corrected everything if, instead of national-patriotic slogans, he had chosen a rhetoric closer to the broad electorate. By focusing on his achievements (securing visa-free travel rights for Ukrainians to the countries of the European Union, more than 30 months of stable economic growth), he could have promised Ukraine's accession to the European Union. That is, "I have already achieved visa-free entry to the EU for you, now I will achieve EU membership for Ukraine and will be able to significantly improve the quality of your life".

Clearly, even if Petro Poroshenko had chosen this winning strategy, without a nationwide channel, he still would not have been able to beat Zelensky, who was supported by the richest and most influential oligarchs in Ukraine. Nevertheless, Zelensky had a bunch of disadvantages. Egregious incompetence, Ukrainophobic jokes, and ties with Kolomoisky could have destroyed him. Zelensky was lucky that there was no one to destroy him. Poroshenko had all the necessary financial resources for victory, but he did not understand what Kolomoisky had known for a long time. Control over media resources

allows for the shaping of necessary public opinion.

The Weakness of Political Institutions – One of the Reasons for Zelensky's Victory

The imperfection of the Ukrainian political system, which allowed a populist to come to power, has a historical explanation. In countries with weak political institutions, leadership in all its manifestations often prevailed, where the sweet rhetoric of promises easily defeats the logical path of sustainable development. Almost all post-Soviet republics, with the exception of the Baltic states, have gone through a stage of authoritarianism or are in it now since the collapse of the USSR.

Since one of the reasons why democracy does not take root well in the countries of the former Soviet Union is the weakness of political parties, it is worth mentioning the recent primaries of the Democratic Party in the USA. If you followed the events of 2020, you surely remember that a significant number of Bernie Sanders' supporters were highly negative towards Joe Biden. However, despite Bernie's defeat in the primaries being a shock for the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, they adhered to party discipline and, gritting their teeth, voted for Biden in November. Even the unofficial leader of the progressives, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, called on all her supporters to vote for Joe Biden in her Instagram. All Democrats understood that Trump's victory would bring much more trouble.

Could a similar situation have occurred in Ukraine in 2019? Absolutely not. Any person capable of adding two plus two understood the danger of bringing Kolomoisky's protégé to power. Especially politicians. But neither Yulia Tymoshenko, nor Arseniy Yatsenyuk, nor even Oleh Lyashko – none of the top politicians of the so-called Orange camp called for a vote for Poroshenko. Although, perhaps, they already understood that the acting president was doomed and Zelensky's victory was guaranteed. Nevertheless, this did not stop many writers and other representatives of the creative intelligentsia from openly supporting Poroshenko. Politicians and public activists did not do this.

Despite all the antipathy towards President Poroshenko and his inability to fight corruption, it was clear that the Kolomoisky group represented a much greater danger to Ukraine. By analogy with the Democratic Party primaries in the USA, faced with a dilemma,

logically thinking people should have chosen the "lesser evil" so that the country could avoid great trouble. But in Ukraine, almost all opinion leaders, except for the patriotic intelligentsia, decided to remain silent. They showed adolescent immaturity and essentially decided to hand over power in a warring country to a populist comedian from Kolomoisky's TV channel.

Zelensky's Voters – Who Are They?

In the second round of the presidential elections, Volodymyr Zelensky received a record number of votes – 73.22% of voters, or 13.5 million Ukrainians voted for him. Of course, not all of these people were devoted fans of the comedian. In the first round, Zelensky received 30.6% of the vote, while his main competitor Petro Poroshenko got 17.8%. However, the antipathy towards the then-president was so great that Zelensky managed to accumulate the overwhelming majority of votes from other candidates before the second round.

Zelensky's core electorate consisted of youth and women – especially those who are not particularly interested in politics. As for other categories of voters, there was a very wide range. Almost all supporters of pro-Russian parties, including communists (except for a negligible number of "true", ideological followers of Lenin and Stalin), voted for Zelensky. They all hated Poroshenko for his anti-Russian policy and were ready to give their votes to anyone who could defeat him. This group also includes supporters of Putin, who understood very well the danger that the incompetent comedian coming to power posed to Ukraine. That's why they voted for him. The worse for Ukraine, the better for Russia.

Nearly everyone who thought that Poroshenko was a corrupt politician and that Ukraine would be better off without him, even with an incompetent Zelensky, cast their votes for Zelensky. The base of this group consisted of supporters of Mikhail Saakashvili and the mayor of Lviv, Andriy Sadovyi. It also includes ultra-right nationalists from "Azov". The latter enjoyed special support from the Minister of Internal Affairs, Arsen Avakov, who, as is known, was one of Poroshenko's most vehement enemies.

Overall, it can be asserted that the majority of Zelensky's voters were people who were poorly versed in politics. People who believed in the advertising billboard "The end of the era of poverty on April 21,

2019". People who could not understand the difference between a fictional character in a TV series and a real presidential candidate. People who took the propaganda from Kolomoisky's TV channel at face value, that Zelensky would become Ukraine's new Ronald Reagan.

Zelensky and Portnov

The resounding victory over Poroshenko not only uplifted the newly elected president but also those who awaited the election results from abroad. On May 16, 2019, not waiting for the official inauguration, Kolomoisky returned to Ukraine for the first time in two years. After being dismissed from the position of head of the Dnipropetrovsk Regional Administration, he initially lived in Switzerland and then, fearing arrest and extradition to the USA, moved to Israel, which does not extradite its citizens at the request of other states. According to Ukrainian law enforcement, the former owner of PrivatBank obtained an Israeli passport back in 1995. There, in the resort city of Herzliya, Kolomoisky lived until Zelensky's victory.

Under Poroshenko, the oligarch's problems were not limited to PrivatBank. From March to August 2015, parallel to the withdrawal of more than \$5 billion from PrivatBank, Kolomoisky executed a scheme to plunder the state-owned "Ukrnafta," where he was a minority shareholder but controlled the management. The leaders of this company illegally transferred oil worth over 10 billion hryvnias (\$450 million) to five private companies, but "Ukrnafta" did not receive any funds for it.

In July 2015, the scheme was repeated in reverse. Kolomoisky's management transferred more than 3 billion hryvnias (\$135 million) from "Ukrnafta's" accounts to shell companies for the supply of oil products. As you might have guessed, the company received neither the oil products nor a refund.

Three days after Kolomoisky's plane landed in Kyiv, another controversial figure returned to Ukraine — Andriy Portnov, the former deputy head of Yanukovych's Administration. During all five years of Poroshenko's presidency, he lived in exile: first in Moscow, then in Vienna.

Portnov has an interesting biography. Born and raised in Luhansk,

in the early 90s, while still studying at the local university's correspondence department, he started working as a lawyer for an oil trading company. In 1997, 24-year-old Andriy Portnov moved to Kyiv, where he somehow obtained a position in the State Commission for Securities and Stock Market. Strangely, just a few months after his appointment, he began to rapidly climb the career ladder. At 28, Portnov became a head of the corporate finance department in this organization.

And then the promising career of the young provincial lawyer suddenly comes to a halt. A year after his appointment, Portnov resigned from public service and went into private business. He opened his own legal practice specializing in investment transactions, including those of a rather dubious nature. Around this time, Andriy Portnov met Kolomoisky and Medvedchuk.

In 2005, Portnov began to actively engage in politics and became the head of the legal department of Yulia Tymoshenko's election campaign. According to former presidential candidate Mykhailo Brodsky, controversial politician and businessman Bohdan Hubsky, repeatedly accused of raiding property, brought Portnov into the prime minister's staff.

Tymoshenko, as a politician, was always characterized by her indiscriminate choice of team members. Then, in 2005-2009, she hardly cared about the biography and views of her associates. The main thing was the benefit this person could bring. And since Portnov proved to be an effective lobbyist, he got a place on the party list of Yulia Tymoshenko's Bloc and became a member of parliament in 2006.

After Yanukovych's victory in 2010, Andriy Portnov quickly left Tymoshenko's team and switched to working for the new president – as a deputy head of the President's Administration.

What makes Andriy Portnov interesting in our story is that he created and controlled for many years an illegal system of influence on the courts. Initially, this was done through bribes, blackmail, or threats. Then, when Portnov became part of Yanukovych's team, he personally selected and approved judicial candidates.

The Ukrainian law enforcement system was so flawed that Portnov managed to control the courts even when he was in opposition to President Yushchenko. And incredibly, he managed to push through the necessary court decisions even after fleeing Ukraine in 2014. Of course, things got a bit more complicated during Poroshenko's years,

but Portnov still had strong connections in the judiciary.

The former deputy head of Yanukovych's Administration never hid his hatred for everything related to Ukrainian national revival. However, that's a side, moral aspect of this case. But here's what's curious. After Zelensky came to power, people associated with Portnov appeared in his Administration (renamed almost immediately to the President's Office): Andriy Smyrnov and Oleh Tatarov. They became deputies of the President's Office, responsible for interactions with courts and law enforcement agencies. As it turned out later, the new president liked the idea of influencing Ukrainian courts. Now, Portnov's judges served the interests of not Yanukovych, but Zelensky.

Even more interestingly, in the summer of 2019, Portnov began publishing information on the progress of the pre-trial investigation against former President Petro Poroshenko in his Telegram channel. He shared information that could only be possessed by the head of the State Bureau of Investigations (SBI), Roman Truba, and published this information before the head of the SBI did.

When Roman Truba was asked how Portnov was the first to receive official information from the State Bureau of Investigations, he simply could not explain anything. The leak of information continued for several more weeks. It seemed that Portnov was simply mocking everyone, flaunting his capabilities.

From all this, one thing was clear: the new president Zelensky not only took a pro-Russian official from Yanukovych's team into his own but effectively gave him control over the key pre-trial investigation agency.

There is ample reason to believe that in February 2022, in the event of the capture of Kyiv by Russian troops, Andriy Portnov, along with the head of the Kyiv District Administrative Court (KDAC) Pavlo Vovk, was supposed to facilitate the return to power of former President Yanukovych. This is evidenced by the fact that on January 14, 2022, a month before the full-scale invasion, the KDAC accepted and opened proceedings on Yanukovych's lawsuit against the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine.

In his lawsuit, the fugitive, by then sentenced in absentia to 13 years in prison, demanded the illegality of his removal from the presidency be recognized. The District Administrative Court not only opened the proceedings on this case but also scheduled the case for consideration in a simplified procedure, without summoning the parties and holding a court session. That is, the court's decision on this

lawsuit could have been made at almost any moment.

The hearing on the case was scheduled for February 16, 2022 — the very day that, according to US intelligence, was considered the start of the war. But, as we know, there was no invasion that day. Most likely, Putin promised Xi Jinping not to start the war until the end of the Olympics in Beijing. Joyfully, Zelensky thought everything was over and declared February 16 a new national holiday, Unity Day. Probably, from the point of view of an experienced comedian, a holiday was exactly what everyone needed at that moment.

On February 16, the District Administrative Court of Kyiv postponed the hearing on Yanukovych's lawsuit against the Ukrainian parliament indefinitely. It did not close the proceedings but announced that the consideration of the case would be notified additionally. Undoubtedly, the trial was supposed to take place. But only after Kyiv was captured by Russian troops. KDAC chairman Pavlo Vovk, along with his long-time curator Andriy Portnov, were supposed to "sanctify" the court decision to return Viktor Yanukovych to power, making him the legitimate president after Zelensky's flight or assassination.

Formally, these are only suspicions, and someone might well call all this a coincidence. After the start of the war, Portnov and Vovk still remained good friends of the Ukrainian power system. Although they have been under US sanctions for several years, Zelensky's Office has no complaints against them.

On Guard for Kolomoisky's Interests

Kolomoisky was never keen on philanthropy. Unlike, for example, Pinchuk, who considers himself a patron of the arts, or Akhmetov, whose TV channel often liked to recall how Rinat Leonidovich helps the residents of Donbas. True, for some time, Kolomoisky financed the football team "Dnipro," which hardly brought any profit. But this cannot be called charity. For oligarchs, owning their football club is like having a three-deck yacht off the coast of Sardinia. An expensive toy.

The money and resources that Kolomoisky spent on Zelensky's victory were not charitable aid. It was an investment. Just two weeks after the inauguration, Zelensky began to repay the oligarch for his support in the election. And not with his own, but with state funds.

In early June 2019, the State Property Fund changed the composition of the supervisory board of "Centrenenergo." This state company is known for generating about 8% of all electricity in Ukraine, owning three thermal power plants: Uglegorsk, Zmiiv, and Trypillia. On June 26, the new supervisory board of "Centrenenergo" changes its director. The new head, Volodymyr Potapenko, almost immediately after appointment, signs direct contracts for the sale of electricity to Ihor Kolomoisky's companies. Electricity was sold at prices significantly below market rates. At the same time, the new director ignored more favorable offers from other buyers.

As a result of such strange management, the state company "Centrenenergo" missed out on 700 million hryvnias (\$28 million) in less than four months. By the end of 2019, the net loss of "Centrenenergo" exceeded 2 billion hryvnias (\$80 million). Although in 2018 and the year before, this company consistently showed good profit.

At this point, someone might ask: "What about the government? Why did it allow the state company to be robbed?" To answer these questions, we need to remember whom Volodymyr Zelensky appointed as Prime Minister. This person became 35-year-old Oleksiy Honcharuk — the youngest head of government in the history of Ukraine (the previous record was held by 43-year-old Pavlo Lazarenko).

Before his appointment to the country's second most important position, Honcharuk had no experience in managing in the public sector or private business. He had never held an elected position. Formally, since 2007, Oleksiy Honcharuk was considered a lawyer and headed several public organizations. But in 2012, he earned money by participating as an extra in Andriy Palchevsky's TV show. There's still a YouTube video where you can see Honcharuk as an audience member in the studio.

Being an extra is one of the least paid jobs in Kyiv, only agreed to by poor students, the unemployed, and pensioners. At that time, it paid 100-200 hryvnias (4-8 dollars) per day. For this money, a person had to sit for 8 or even 10 hours and clap on command. The "lawyer" and "public activist" Honcharuk worked as an extra.

And it was precisely this inexperienced individual whom Zelensky decided to entrust with Ukraine's economy. It is now clear that this appointment occurred only because Kolomoisky's group needed a Prime Minister who would sign the necessary documents without any questions and could easily be blamed for all the problems later.

That's exactly what happened. By the end of 2019, the hole in Ukraine's state budget grew to 120 billion hryvnias, 30 billion more than stipulated by the budget law. The state did not receive almost 37 billion planned revenues from customs and taxes. The budget was fulfilled only thanks to internal borrowing at high interest rates.

In 2019, the Ministry of Finance sold government bonds worth 227 billion hryvnias (over \$9 billion), 249.4% more than in 2018. The average borrowing interest rate was 16.9% per annum. In addition, \$4.331 billion (+ 24.5% compared to 2018) and 387 million euros were borrowed. In just six months, Zelensky and his "new faces" destroyed the stable economic growth left by Poroshenko and began living in debt. Over 4.5 years of Zelensky's rule, Ukraine's state debt increased from \$80 billion to \$145 billion.

Oleksiy Honcharuk was a dilettante but not an idiot. He understood what was happening around "Centrenergo" and that he could be blamed for this theft someday. On February 26, 2020, the Cabinet of Ministers under Honcharuk decided to replace the leadership of "Centrenergo" and prepare it for privatization.

Two days later, on February 28, the Prime Minister was summoned by the President. According to sources from the "Dzerkalo Tyzhnia," during this conversation, Zelensky stated that Kolomoisky was extremely dissatisfied with the replacement of the head of "Centrenergo." That same evening, the head of Zelensky's "Servant of the People" faction, David Arakhamia, informed the press that personnel decisions were planned in the government. The story ended with Honcharuk being dismissed from the position of Prime Minister of Ukraine "at his own request" on March 4, a week after crossing Kolomoisky.

After his resignation, Oleksiy Honcharuk disappeared from public politics and left for the USA for almost two years. In early 2022, two months after the war began, he returned to Ukraine. In 2023, the former prime minister announced that he heads the supervisory board of the public organization "Aerorozvidka," which designs drones for the army.

The Olympics and Love for Money

It would be a mistake to think that Zelensky, upon becoming president, would limit himself to merely lobbying Kolomoisky's

business interests. The first alarm bell, indicating that the new president is trying to tread the familiar path of corruption typical for Ukrainian officials, rang just a month after the inauguration.

On July 16, 2019, Zelensky decided to revive Yanukovych's idea, expressing a desire to host the Olympics in Lviv. On the same day, the Ministry of Youth and Sports and the National Olympic Committee were ordered to develop a strategic plan for hosting these sports competitions in Ukraine.

"We need a certain plan, saying, for example, that we are ready to build everything in 3-4 years, and then we can be in line to host the Olympics. We must be ambitious," Zelensky stated.

At first glance, what's wrong with hosting the world's most prestigious sports games in the largest city of Western Ukraine? It would undoubtedly stimulate the development of the tourism and construction industries, at least in the west. However, upon closer examination, the overall balance between advantages and disadvantages is not in favor of this project. Over the last 20 years, almost all Olympics, both summer and winter, have only brought billion-dollar losses to the host countries.

Ukraine, one of the poorest countries in Europe, had already experienced hosting major sports competitions. In 2012, during President Yanukovych's time, four Ukrainian cities hosted the European Football Championship. Having spent \$5.5 billion on preparations for the Euro, Ukraine only recouped \$1 billion. The lion's share of the money settled in the accounts of construction companies linked to Yanukovych's Party of Regions' allies.

The love for sports from Yanukovych and Zelensky is simple to explain. The specifics of Ukrainian corruption require adherence to a certain procedure. Budget money cannot just be stolen outright. Formally, it needs to be spent on something. Large infrastructure projects are best suited for this. State funding is distributed to companies connected to those in power through inflated construction contracts. Tender conditions for the work are written in such a way that a predetermined company wins.

Do you think a poor country, where more than 7 million pensioners receive about \$100 a month, can afford to spend \$8 billion on a two-week sports show? The answer is probably clear.

Undoubtedly, Zelensky's desire to host the Olympics was not just about populism, but a cold calculation of a pickpocket choosing a

victim in a subway car. Only a month had passed since the newly elected head of state took office, but his first steps indicated that Ukrainians were not just in for a show — they were doomed to be robbed.

The project to host the Olympics ended in nothing. The desire to host the Olympic Games does not guarantee their realization. There is significant competition between economically developed countries, for whom spending \$10 billion on sports competitions is not a big problem. Later, Zelensky repeated the idea of hosting the Olympics in Lviv several times. The last time it was mentioned was in September 2021 during the visit to Ukraine of the IOC President Thomas Bach. But it went no further than talks. Later, the war started, and the Olympic Games were no longer a priority.

However, Zelensky was not particularly upset. He and his team found another, quicker, and more effective way to enrich themselves: the large-scale road repair program "Big Construction."

The Big Construction – The Heist of the Century from Ukraine's Budget

In March 2020, Volodymyr Zelensky announced the start of a large-scale infrastructure project called "Big Construction." Initially, many thought it was just another fantasy of the president. He had already shared his plans for future megaprojects with journalists, the implementation of which was hard to imagine under Ukrainian conditions. For instance, Zelensky proposed creating an analog of America's Silicon Valley in Kharkiv, opening a Disneyland somewhere in Ukraine, and building a "Ukrainian Hollywood."

But this time, things got serious. In 2020, 121.8 billion hryvnias (\$4.5 billion) were decided to be allocated for road repairs and construction of various infrastructure objects, and in 2021 – another 140 billion hryvnias (\$5.1 billion). The project was partially funded through state loans and international aid.

A peculiar feature of the "Big Construction" was that the cost of one kilometer of new road under Zelensky tripled compared to 2018. Another interesting fact is that, by the end of 2020, 62% of all construction contracts were won by a cartel of six road companies.

To ensure no outsider could win a large tender, the parliamentary

majority controlled by the president passed a special law provision, according to which only participants who had experience in performing work not less than the size of the announced tender could participate in the tender. Simultaneously, the client, represented by the state company "Ukravtodor," deliberately increased the sizes of tenders. They exceeded 1 billion hryvnias.

Formally, the tender's profitability was about 20%. However, in addition to the margin, the tenders also inflated the prices of construction materials: by 20% or even 30% above the real price.

Corruption in the "Big Construction" reached such an extent that every influential official from the President's Office had their "favorite" road construction company, which they lobbied. For instance, Zelensky was associated with the Turkish company "Onur." Yuriy Golik, Kyrylo Tymoshenko, and Andriy Yermak had other protégés.

Outsiders were cut off from state funds by various methods. In early 2021, a tender for the construction of the "Dnipro" airfield was won by "Altis" company, which offered 3.95 billion hryvnias. But someone disliked it. The Antimonopoly Committee, then headed by Olha Pishchanska — the sister of Zelensky's close friend Svitlana Pishchanska, blocked the funding of construction works for two months, and the tender winner could not meet its terms. As a result, the contract with "Altis" was terminated, and a new tender was won by the company "Onur," close to Zelensky. The cost of the work after this increased by 1.7 billion hryvnias.

Even a superficial analysis of the situation gives every reason to assert that the "Big Construction" was a large-scale corruption project. Three years before the full-scale war, Ukraine spent about \$10 billion on it. At least \$1 billion from this amount settled in the crypto wallets of officials close to the president. Essentially, Zelensky revived Yanukovych's corruption schemes. Only then, instead of the "Big Construction," it was the preparation for the European Football Championship.

Adding particular cynicism is the fact that, to finance roads, the government canceled or significantly reduced the execution of many other programs, including the purchase of weapons for the army. During three years of Zelensky's presidency, not a single shell was purchased for the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Programs for missile production and modern types of weapons were shut down. Instead, funds previously allocated for the army were redirected to the corrupt project "Big Construction."

Dubious Benefits for Oligarchs

Back in 2019, many people noticed the strange behavior of the new president towards big business. Zelensky grimly frowned at the mention of possible violations by foreign investors and strangely overlooked the same accusations when they were directed at Ukrainian oligarchs.

For example, the issue of ecology. Residents of some industrial cities in Ukraine have long complained about harmful emissions from metallurgical plants. Typically, these plants use outdated Soviet equipment. Moreover, during the USSR era, when these enterprises were built, the norms for harmful emissions into the atmosphere were much higher than they are now. Of course, the new owners of the plants could install modern filtration systems that would reduce harmful emissions into the atmosphere, but they were not very willing to spend tens of millions of dollars on this.

On July 20, 2019, the Security Service of Ukraine conducted searches at the country's largest metallurgical enterprise, "ArcelorMittal Kryvyi Rih". The searches began a week after Volodymyr Zelensky criticized the management of this plant for harming the ecology.

A few words about the history of this metallurgical giant. In the last year of President Kuchma's term, when the plant was still called "Kryvorizhstal" and was state-owned, it was decided to privatize it. The auction conditions were arranged so that none of the competitors could participate in the bidding. Therefore, the consortium "Investment Metallurgical Union" (founders – President Kuchma's son-in-law Viktor Pinchuk and the Donetsk oligarch Rinat Akhmetov) became the buyer. They paid \$800 million for the plant, which was much less than its real value.

Half a year after privatization, the "Orange Revolution" began, and opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko became president. Since the privatization of "Kryvorizhstal" was clearly violated, it was quickly annulled. Pinchuk and Akhmetov did not protest much because they feared mass reprivatization. They amassed their fortune by buying state-owned plants for tens of millions of dollars, which were actually worth billions. Therefore, they agreed to give up "Kryvorizhstal" and did not challenge this decision in court, hoping that their other plants would not be taken away.

A new privatization auction was held transparently, live on

television, for the first time in the history of privatization in Ukraine. Indian billionaire Lakshmi Mittal won the auction for "Kryvorizhstal" with a bid of \$4.8 billion. Since 2005, the new owner has invested about \$4.4 billion in modernizing the enterprise.

But let's return to 2019. On July 17, in addition to the SBU searches, a criminal case was initiated against the enterprise under Article 441 of the Criminal Code – "ecocide", which entails imprisonment for a term of 8 to 15 years. Simultaneously, Zelensky directly hinted to the owner of the plant about the need to allocate financial assistance to those affected by harmful emissions.

On August 8, top managers of "ArcelorMittal Kryvyi Rih" met with the president. As a result of the conversation, agreements were reached: representatives of the plant promised to build an oncology center in Kryvyi Rih for 400 million hryvnias and increase investments in environmental protection. After the meeting, the criminal case on ecocide was immediately closed.

The fact that this story smells a bit like racketeering is just one side of the matter. Zelensky's principled stance would be commendable if he tackled the ecological problems of other cities with the same energy. Kryvyi Rih only ranked fourth in the list of Ukrainian cities with the dirtiest air. The situation in Mariupol, Kamianske, and Dnipro was even worse. But the air there was polluted by the plants of local oligarchs: Akhmetov, Kolomoisky, Pinchuk, and Yaroslavsky. Zelensky, for some reason, had no complaints against them, and no criminal cases for ecocide were initiated against these enterprises. Perhaps if Lakshmi Mittal owned not only a metallurgical plant but also a TV channel in Ukraine, he would not have had such problems.

The scheme of cooperation between Zelensky and the oligarchs was very simple. Kolomoisky, Pinchuk, and Akhmetov received electricity at preferential prices from state power stations. Who lost in this? First of all, the state company "Energoatom", which manages nuclear power plants, as well as state hydroelectric power stations and "Centrenergo". Who wins and increases their income? The oligarchs and their metallurgical plants.

Another example of corrupt lobbying for the interests of oligarchs can be seen in the case of writing off debts to gas companies. On July 14, 2021, the parliament, controlled by Zelensky, passed a law on "regulating" the debt of natural gas market subjects. This law allowed private gas distribution companies to write off debts to the state amounting to 58 billion hryvnias (approximately \$2.2 billion).

Coincidentally, 70% of these companies belonged to oligarch and owner of the "Inter" TV channel Dmytro Firtash. If you remember, Volodymyr Zelensky once held the position of general producer on the "Inter" TV channel.

Interestingly, a similar law on writing off debts to oil and gas companies was passed under President Yanukovych, 10 years before the events mentioned. Then, in May 2011, the parliament, at that time controlled by the Party of Regions, passed the law "On Certain Issues of Debt for Consumed Natural Gas and Electric Energy". Thanks to this document, the state forgave the debts of enterprises in the fuel and energy complex amounting to more than 24 billion hryvnias. At the then exchange rate, this was almost \$3 billion. The state missed out on approximately \$1 billion (7.4 billion hryvnias) due to the writing off of debts to gas companies, most of which were controlled by Firtash.

As you can see, Zelensky, who verbally portrays himself as a fighter against oligarchs and corruption, upon coming to power, began to work according to the old schemes proven by Yanukovych. State money was given to oligarchs. In return, oligarchic TV channels demonstrated complete loyalty to the current government. In the end, the state budget, that is, ordinary citizens: workers in the budget sector and pensioners, for whom there was somehow always not enough money in the Ukrainian budget, lost the most.

How Zelensky Fought the Coronavirus

For a time, ordinary Ukrainians perceived Volodymyr Zelensky as part of a political show. Yes, most of them had begun to suspect they were deceived. There would be no breakthrough to the happy future that the TV comedian had promised before the elections. But this was the case with every president. Half the country hates him, half supports him. The main thing was that people could live peacefully, and no one interfered in their affairs.

Notably, deep down, Ukrainians fully understand the danger that amateurs pose. This can be seen in their attitude towards doctors. In case of serious illness, Ukrainians immediately seek out the best doctor in the city and personally bribe him to ensure the surgery goes well and that the doctor makes every effort to save their relative. In times of real health danger, they are not at all concerned that this doctor is corrupt and has taken bribes all his life. No one wants a bad doctor or, even worse, a novice without experience to perform their

surgery.

The first serious crisis that came to Ukraine with the coronavirus showed that in the 2019 elections, Ukrainians deceived themselves. A comedian cannot protect the population in case of a threat. His purpose is to entertain people, not save them. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that in our case, the head of the state was a corrupt comedian.

Let's recall the sequence of events. The first case of coronavirus in Ukraine was detected at the end of February 2020, a month later than in most other European countries. This gave Ukrainian authorities additional time to better prepare for the epidemic. Indeed, initially, it appeared that the Ukrainian Ministry of Health was ready to face the new challenge. Television and the internet began to explain to the population the need to wash hands more often and avoid contact with those who show signs of a cold or have recently returned from abroad. New instructions were also given to border guards. On January 31, by the order of President Zelensky, the government formed an operational staff to fight the coronavirus.

But then everything went according to the worst scenario. As in other countries, panic began in Ukraine. People started hoarding medical masks and cold symptom medications from pharmacies. The cost of a regular medical mask rose from 1 to 17 hryvnias.

In early March 2020, a scandal erupted. Spanish television showed a story about the arrival of a shipment of medical masks and respirators of Ukrainian manufacture. As it turned out, in February, 118 tons of filtered masks and 408 tons of non-filtered masks were exported from Ukraine. Most other countries had already banned the export of these medical products. But not in Ukraine. On January 31 and February 3, the Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council, Oleksiy Danilov, sent two letters to Prime Minister Oleksiy Honcharuk about the need to ban the export of medical masks. Nonetheless, the government did not respond for more than a month. The export ban on these products was introduced only on March 11, when millions of masks had already been exported from Ukraine. Let me remind you that an operational staff had been working in the country for over a month, headed by the president.

By March 20, 2020, 40 cases of Covid-19 had already been confirmed in Ukraine. The vaccine was still far off. At that time, all attention was focused on coronavirus tests and ventilators. There was a shortage of tests, but they began to be supplied to the country

through the World Health Organization. The situation with ventilators was even worse. For a country of 42 million, there were only 3,900 units. But similar problems were observed in other countries; Ukraine was not an exception. Meanwhile, the epidemic gradually spread across the regions. The mortality rate of patients connected to ventilators in Ukraine was 88%. This is a high figure. In Germany, for example, it was 53%.

What was the president doing during the crisis? On April 12, 2020, Zelensky publicly promised a \$1 million reward to Ukrainian scientists for inventing a vaccine or medicine against coronavirus. A rather strange offer, considering that Ukraine lacks the laboratories and specialists for molecular modeling of drugs at such a level. The president might as well have promised \$1 billion for a Ukrainian's flight to Mars.

This is just another aspect of Volodymyr Zelensky's portrait, with worse to come. The first signs that Ukrainians were facing serious problems appeared in the summer of 2020 when clinical trials of the first vaccines began in the USA and Europe. Ukrainian authorities did not even try to reserve a minimum quantity of vaccines directly from the manufacturers, as the governments of the United Kingdom, USA, Canada, Israel, and many other countries did. These countries acted quite actively, while Ukraine simply waited for free vaccines to be provided through WHO and the UN.

Mass vaccination of the population in Ukraine started on February 24, 2021, much later than in EU countries. For example, on the same day, February 24, the Polish government reported that 1 million people had already been vaccinated in their country.

The pace of vaccination in Ukraine remained very slow throughout the epidemic. By the end of March 2021, only 230,000 Ukrainians, or 0.4% of the population, had been vaccinated. The operational staff led by Zelensky did almost nothing to accelerate vaccination. The situation could have been improved by issuing clear orders mandating vaccination for the population involved in the real sector of the economy, under threat of dismissal or fines. However, none of this was done. Instead of real work, the president only made promises.

On May 5, 2021, Volodymyr Zelensky stated that by Independence Day (August 24), most Ukrainians should be vaccinated. Of course, this remained just empty words. As of August 24, only 3.2 million people, or less than 10% of the country's population, had been vaccinated.

While in neighboring Poland, the vaccination of teachers was completed by March 7, in Ukraine, it was delayed by 5 months. Only in August, before the start of the new school year on September 1, did the state finally threaten to prevent teachers who had not yet received the vaccine from working.

By the end of October 2021, only 16% of the population in Ukraine was vaccinated. For comparison: in France – 79%, in Germany – 66%, Latvia – 49%, Romania – 29%. Ukraine's figures were lower than any EU country. Even in Bulgaria, the least vaccinated country in the European Union, more than 20% of people were vaccinated.

The vaccination failure cost Ukraine tens of thousands of additional lives that could have been saved if the authorities had acted decisively. Apparently, Zelensky was afraid to make unpopular decisions to avoid losing voter support. It is worth noting that a significant portion of Zelensky's supporters are poorly educated. If a person is skeptical about vaccination, there's a 90% chance they are a Zelensky voter. Being an experienced showman, the president did not want to disappoint his audience, did not want to coerce anyone, and procrastinated in the hope that the problem would somehow disappear on its own. The result of this delay is tens of thousands of deaths. These people could have stayed alive if not for Zelensky.

According to official data as of September 2023, 109,000 people died from coronavirus in Ukraine. But there are reasons to believe that these numbers are significantly understated. The statistics on overall mortality indicate that, from March 2020 to July 2021, Ukraine saw about 100,000 "excess" deaths compared to previous years. Meanwhile, official statistics claim that as of the end of June 2021, 52,532 people had died from coronavirus in Ukraine. This contradiction suggests that for every recorded death from COVID-19, there was another unrecorded one. Likely, to avoid spoiling the statistics of their medical institution or region, doctors often recorded the cause of death as another disease, such as pneumonia or heart failure.

Against Biden, in Favor of Trump and Russia

On May 19, 2020, Member of Parliament Andriy Derkach held an online conference, during which he released an audio recording made up of various parts of several phone conversations between Joe Biden

and Petro Poroshenko. According to the parliamentarian, he received this recording from investigative journalists, and all conversations were recorded in Poroshenko's office when he was still the president.

Sitting next to Derkach at the conference table in the news agency "Interfax-Ukraine" were Member of Parliament from the "Servant of the People" faction, former journalist of the "1 + 1" TV channel, Oleksandr Dubinsky, and former Deputy Prosecutor General of Ukraine, Konstantin Kulik. Both had a controversial reputation and had repeatedly worked in the interests of Kolomoisky. Regarding Kulik, The New York Times reported in October 2019 that he was the author of the document that formed the basis of corruption charges against Hunter Biden during his work at Burisma Group.

As Andriy Derkach stated at the online conference, the materials he disclosed "demonstrate facts of international corruption and high treason at the highest state level" and "clearly show... Biden was managing Ukraine."

The content of the released audio recordings included, for example, a conversation from March 22, 2016, dedicated to allocating \$1 billion in budget support to Ukraine. For this assistance, Biden demanded from Poroshenko to intensify the fight against corruption, which was one of the conditions for cooperation between Ukraine and the IMF. The conversation also touched upon the dismissal of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine, Viktor Shokin. According to Biden, Shokin was blocking the process of cleansing the Prosecutor General's Office.

In another conversation from February 18, 2016, Poroshenko acknowledged that he did not have a parliamentary majority, as two out of four parliamentary factions had left the coalition. Theoretically, this was a basis for holding early elections, which Poroshenko wanted to avoid.

These were two of the most interesting moments. Nothing criminal was revealed in the conversations. Nevertheless, Derkach tried to present his audio recording as a basis for initiating criminal proceedings against Poroshenko. Understandably, due to local specifics, this criminal proceeding was unlikely to have any judicial prospects. But the very fact of such proceedings being registered in Ukraine, involving Joe Biden, could negatively impact the US election campaign. It's worth noting that Derkach's briefing took place in May 2020, when Joe Biden had already effectively received the Democratic Party nomination.

Just imagine the potential consequences of this case. A few weeks before the first debate between Biden and Trump, the State Bureau of Investigations of Ukraine summons Joe Biden for questioning in Kyiv, and then declares him wanted for failing to appear. Clearly, this was the maximum outcome the scandal's authors were hoping for.

Fortunately, the parliament understood the danger they were trying to drag Ukraine into, so no investigative commission was created in the Verkhovna Rada. And a few days later, when Zelensky was plainly explained what Derkach was dragging him into, the State Bureau of Investigations lost interest in registering the criminal case.

Even then, it was clear that the roots of this case led either to Russia or to Trump's team – to those who were extremely uninterested in Biden's victory. At first glance, the Russian trail seemed most probable. Andriy Derkach graduated from the FSB Academy in Moscow in 1993 and never particularly hid his pro-Russian views. But, most likely, this story began in Madrid. It was there on August 22, 2019, that a meeting took place between the Deputy Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine, Andriy Yermak, and Trump's personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani. At this meeting, according to The New York Times, Giuliani persistently called on Yermak to "just investigate the damn things" (related to Biden). In return, Giuliani promised to expedite the visit of the Ukrainian president to the USA and hinted that Zelensky's meeting with Trump depended on the mentioned investigations in Ukraine.

Zelensky's role in this story was that he agreed to transfer the telephone recordings to Derkach. Apparently, they were stored in the archive of the President's Office along with text transcripts. Probably, Zelensky, due to his incompetence, simply did not understand the consequences these recordings could lead to. Playing on Trump's side could jeopardize bipartisan support for Ukraine in the US Congress and Senate. But if Zelensky's involvement could be attributed to inexperience, why Andriy Yermak agreed to this adventure remains unclear.

Most likely, Zelensky was used without fully understanding the situation. This can be inferred from his statement on May 20, 2020, when the president said that "Derkach's tapes" could lead to a criminal case against Poroshenko for treason. It's quite possible Yermak promised Zelensky that the only consequence of disclosing the conversations would be problems for Poroshenko. Biden was not mentioned.

In August 2023, the "cassette scandal," which had begun to fade against the backdrop of the war, resurfaced. On August 3, law enforcement conducted a search at the home of Member of Parliament Oleksandr Dubinsky – the very person who sat next to Derkach when he talked about the recordings of conversations between Poroshenko and Biden. Officially, law enforcement was searching for Dubinsky's passport. A few weeks before, he had left for Austria, allegedly to accompany his sick father for treatment, though he actually went on vacation to the resorts of Italy, Croatia, and Spain. Journalists found out about this, causing a minor scandal. Zelensky needed to mitigate the negative public perception, so he wanted to discipline Dubinsky.

It's necessary to explain that Oleksandr Dubinsky is not just any deputy. He is a former journalist for Kolomoisky's TV channel, who played a very important role in discrediting Poroshenko before the elections. If Zelensky mocked the former president from his show's stage, portraying him as an alcoholic and a failure, Dubinsky worked differently. In his TV program "Money," he focused on the corruption of Poroshenko and his entourage. Comparing the contributions of Zelensky and Dubinsky to destroying the former president's rating, it's hard to say who had a more significant impact.

Of course, Dubinsky was more qualified, but in Kolomoisky's puppet theater, there was only one vacancy for the president. Fate smiled on Zelensky, and Dubinsky remained for the owner of "1 + 1" a simple Jewish boy who had to do the dirty work.

After the elections, some tension appeared between these two characters, which only intensified over time. Volodymyr Zelensky became president and gained access to enormous financial resources. Dubinsky's reward was a place in the "Servant of the People" parliamentary faction and a few trifles: in November 2019, journalists discovered that after several years of working for Kolomoisky, Oleksandr Dubinsky became the owner of 24 apartments, two houses, and 17 cars.

Wishing to punish Dubinsky for his unauthorized vacation, Zelensky forgot he was dealing with an experienced propagandist. Immediately after the search, Dubinsky claimed he was being persecuted because he had testified in Andriy Derkach's treason case. And the traces of this case lead to the President's Office.

"It was the Office of President Zelensky that demanded my participation in creating an investigative commission in the Verkhovna Rada on the topic of the Poroshenko-Biden tapes. And it

was the Office of the President that demanded my participation in that press conference where Derkach published the corresponding tapes," Dubinsky stated.

Obviously, the deputy took such a risky step in the face of the threat of criminal liability for forgery of official documents. The maximum punishment for this article entails 6 years of imprisonment. Given Dubinsky's closeness to Kolomoisky, he was unlikely to end up in jail. But the further course of events showed that Dubinsky's confidence was premature. The fact is, Zelensky is very sensitive to criticism and dislikes those who insult him.

In the fall of 2023, already under house arrest, Dubinsky imprudently crossed the line, publishing facts of Zelensky's corruption in his Telegram channel. He also made several personal attacks against the president. This was enough to lock up the former ally in jail. Now he was accused of treason. According to the SBU, Oleksandr Dubinsky, together with Andriy Derkach, worked for Russian intelligence and engaged in activities "aimed at destabilizing the internal political situation" and "discrediting the country's leadership." The maximum punishment for this article is up to 15 years of imprisonment.

As of May 2024, Oleksandr Dubinsky is still detained in a pre-trial detention center in Kyiv. All his properties and cars have been seized. Whether Dubinsky worked for the Russians is not for me to assert, but many publications he spread through his social networks indeed coincided with Russian propaganda.

Regarding the episode with the audio recordings of conversations between Biden and Poroshenko, there are significant doubts that Derkach received these tapes from the Russians. Understandably, the Security Service of Ukraine cannot officially support another version, according to which Derkach was given the tapes from the Office of the President of Ukraine. Then, accusations of treason would have to be made against not only Volodymyr Zelensky but certainly against the head of his Office, Andriy Yermak.

The PrivatBank Case: The First Contradictions Between Zelensky and Kolomoisky

It would be a mistake to consider Zelensky a puppet who

uncomplainingly executes all of Kolomoisky's orders. That's not the case. Perhaps, before winning the presidential election, Zelensky regarded the oligarch as his boss, although in reality, they were more like business partners. However, everything changed after the victory over Poroshenko. The former comedian became an independent figure who maintained close relations with Kolomoisky on equal terms.

It should be noted that, despite the dubious reputation of the former owner of PrivatBank, Zelensky did not try to distance himself from him after taking office as president. Almost immediately, he appointed Andriy Bohdan, one of Kolomoisky's former lawyers, as the head of his administration. The president's personal bodyguard, Maksym Donets, also turned out to be a man of Kolomoisky. Until 2019, he was the oligarch's bodyguard, and after the start of the election campaign, he was appointed to protect Zelensky.

As is known, a month after coming to power, Zelensky made a generous gift to his former patron. Starting from July 2019, Kolomoisky's management began to plunder the state energy company "Centrenego". However, the oligarch did not intend to stop at this episode alone. The main prize for him was to regain control of PrivatBank. After the overthrow of Poroshenko, Kolomoisky had all the opportunities for this. It only required a couple of court decisions, which Andriy Portnov would take care of.

The fact that the former owner was seriously planning to get the country's largest bank back is evidenced by the actions of the District Administrative Court of Kyiv. A few days before the second round of elections, when it was clear that the incumbent president was about to pack his things from the office, the judges made three decisions in favor of Kolomoisky.

On April 18, 2019, the District Administrative Court of Kyiv satisfied the oligarch's lawsuit against the National Bank and the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine about the illegality of the nationalization of PrivatBank. The court also canceled the National Bank's decision on identifying a list of persons related to the bank. In December 2016, it was precisely this decision of the National Bank that was one of the decisive factors in the process of removing the insolvent PrivatBank from the market.

Two days later, on April 20, 2019, the Pechersk District Court of Kyiv canceled Kolomoisky's property guarantee for the loans that the National Bank issued to PrivatBank in 2013. The total amount of these loans was 9.2 billion hryvnias.

Everything was heading towards the return of the bank, with almost 20 million clients, to its former owner after Zelensky came to power. But Kolomoisky did not take into account that the PrivatBank case had become too public, not only in Ukraine but also abroad. Western creditors started to worry about the prospect of reversing the nationalization of the country's largest bank. For Ukraine, this could lead not only to increased rates on government securities but also to the cessation of cooperation with the International Monetary Fund. The denationalization of PrivatBank meant that Ukraine was effectively giving the scandalous oligarch the money borrowed from the IMF.

Another nuance that made the scenario of reversing the nationalization impossible was that the state had invested its own finances into PrivatBank's capital. Kolomoisky handed over an empty bank to the state. He had siphoned off \$5.5 billion to shell companies. Now, even if a corrupt court returns PrivatBank to Kolomoisky, it still couldn't start operations. In case of denationalization, the state must take its funds out of the bank's capital (more than \$5 billion), and according to the current regulations of the National Bank of Ukraine, Kolomoisky would have to inject this amount for recapitalization.

Kolomoisky had no intention of returning anything to Ukraine – the stolen funds were hidden in offshore companies and crypto wallets. He understood that the scenario of getting the bank back wouldn't work. Therefore, the oligarch proposed another option: the state pays him compensation for PrivatBank in the amount of \$2 billion, he becomes a minority shareholder of the bank, and the state gets the controlling stake. The funds allocated by the Ministry of Finance remain in the bank's capital. Kolomoisky also wanted another trifle: to install his management at the helm of the state-owned PrivatBank.

Yes, you guessed it. This was Kolomoisky's favorite scheme, which had worked for many years at "Ukrnafta" and then at "Centrenergo". If this idea had been realized, then PrivatBank would have faced the unhappy fate of "Ukrnafta" – it would immediately start showing losses or minimal profit. The oligarch-controlled management would begin issuing insider loans to companies associated with Kolomoisky.

In the end, Zelensky was afraid to agree to a settlement regarding PrivatBank, which Kolomoisky had proposed to him. Protecting state interests had nothing to do with it. Subsequent events showed that Zelensky repeatedly lobbied for Kolomoisky's business interests, even if they brought obvious losses to the state. Simply, the PrivatBank case

was too visible, and its denationalization could have destroyed cooperation with the IMF.

This episode became the first disagreement between Zelensky and Kolomoisky. Yes, the oligarch failed to get at least two billion dollars through a settlement agreement. However, he wasn't too offended. It was clear that the president's position was precarious, and it was not wise to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs. There was still plenty of time. According to Kolomoisky's plan, Ukraine was to become a reliable rear for him for the next 10 years, for both presidential terms of Zelensky.

Kolomoisky and Prison

One of Zelensky's main problems was that he did not control the anti-corruption bodies. The National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU), established in 2015, formally had an independent status and did not report to the president, though it coordinated its activities with the General Prosecutor's Office. Theoretically, this could have posed problems for many people in Zelensky's team. Given the Ukrainian specifics, such a case would not reach court, but even media exposure on corruption charges could significantly harm any politician's career.

Notably, during Zelensky's time, NABU did not show particular activity in investigating corruption among the president's entourage and deputies of his faction. For example, they were not at all interested in information about the unofficial salary paid to deputies of the "Servant of the People". Nor were they concerned about why state funds were being embezzled in contracts for construction and road repairs.

However, NABU had to show some results. The creation of the Anti-Corruption Bureau and the start of its activities occurred with the active assistance of the governments of the USA and Western European countries. And of course, the heads of Western embassies began, at a minimum, to inquire when NABU would start fighting top corrupt officials. And the first name on this list was Ihor Kolomoisky.

Despite some disagreements between Zelensky and Kolomoisky regarding the PrivatBank case, in all other issues, the oligarch received maximum assistance from the new authority. Kolomoisky's management led large state enterprises, and his private companies

received cheap electricity from state power stations, which they then resold to other enterprises.

In the first weeks after the start of the war, Kolomoisky became so bold that his company "United Energy" simply stole 716 million UAH (\$24 million) from the state-owned "Ukrenergo." This happened in March 2022 when "United Energy" bought electricity from "Ukrenergo" at a preferential price with deferred payment, after which it immediately sold it at a markup, and the proceeds (716 million UAH) were transferred to the accounts of a foreign company.

The NABU leadership continued to delicately balance between Zelensky and the West, turning a blind eye to Kolomoisky, but the issue was becoming fundamental. Everyone understood perfectly well: Kolomoisky is the Al Capone in the world of Ukrainian corruption, and without his arrest, it's hard to explain to the Americans what the results of the work of Ukraine's anti-corruption bodies are.

In September 2023, Ihor Kolomoisky unexpectedly received three suspicions of committing crimes: from the Bureau of Economic Security, the Security Service of Ukraine, and the Office of the General Prosecutor. The oligarch was suspected of fraud, embezzlement, and legalization of funds obtained through criminal means. It should be noted that all three mentioned law enforcement bodies fall under the authority vertically controlled by the president.

Interestingly, investigators somehow forgot to file a petition to seize Kolomoisky's property, although it is a mandatory procedure in large-scale fraud cases. After the arrest, the oligarch was placed in a temporary detention facility of the SBU. This organization, unlike NABU, is under the full control of President Zelensky.

Another surprising detail of this case was that Kolomoisky refused to be released on bail of 509 million UAH (\$14 million). At first glance, this decision is hard to explain, given that in 2019, Ihor Kolomoisky estimated his fortune at \$8 billion. In most cases, suspects do not wish to stay in detention for long and post bail at the first opportunity. However, the oligarch did not do this.

According to Vitaliy Shabunin, the head of the Anti-Corruption Action Center, the actions of Kolomoisky and the law enforcement bodies subordinate to the president are not so difficult to understand. NABU and the Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office planned to issue a suspicion to Kolomoisky on Independence Day, August 24. But they decided to postpone it to the beginning of September due to the leadership of the anti-corruption bodies' trip to the USA.

NABU investigators summoned Kolomoisky for early September. There, he was supposed to be handed a suspicion and arrested. To preempt NABU, investigators controlled by the president's people from the SBU and the Bureau of Economic Security took advantage of the absence of the leadership of the anti-corruption bodies and themselves handed over the suspicion. After that, Kolomoisky was locked up in the SBU detention center.

The essence of all this was to protect Kolomoisky from being handled by the uncontrollable NABU investigators, and to ensure the oligarch was not detained in a regular detention center. Moreover, investigators from the SBU and the Bureau of Economic Security could now either seize important evidence for NABU or, conversely, initiate access to the materials of the NABU case through temporary accesses.

The main risk for Kolomoisky was that he could be extradited to the USA on money laundering charges. A few months earlier, Zelensky recklessly stripped his former business partner of Ukrainian citizenship to exclude him from the future registry of oligarchs. Therefore, at the time of arrest, Kolomoisky was formally considered a foreign citizen. According to a court decision, he could be extradited to another state. But as long as Kolomoisky is in the SBU detention center, he is completely safe.

If Ihor Kolomoisky posts bail and is released, he can be arrested on another charge, as there are many other dubious episodes in the oligarch's long career. And this arrest could be initiated not by the SBU, but by NABU.

As of May 2024, Ihor Kolomoisky remains in the SBU detention center and has no intention of posting bail.

The Failed Megaprojects of the President

As a true populist, Volodymyr Zelensky was not fond of limiting himself in the promises he happily distributed to voters. Naturally, almost all of them remained fantasies. For instance, on June 7, 2021, the president promised to plant 1 billion trees in Ukraine over three years. A very good and bold initiative, considering that Ukraine has a disproportionately high area of arable greenery and an extremely small area of forests relative to the country's total area. The only problem: implementing such an idea in practice is impossible.

Critics of the president immediately calculated on social networks: to plant a billion trees in Ukraine over three years, more than 10 trees per second need to be planted. Experts also questioned the president's initiative:

"If trees are planted at a density of 1 tree every 5 meters (which looks like a fairly dense forest), then one hectare can accommodate 492 trees. Accordingly, a square kilometer can accommodate a hundred times more – 49,200 trees. 330 million trees a year will cover 6,775 square kilometers. Over three years, this will be 20.3 thousand square kilometers, which constitutes more than 3.6 percent of the territory controlled by the government of Ukraine. According to official data, existing forests currently occupy about 16% of the territory," said the director of the Association of Energy Efficient Cities of Ukraine, Sviatoslav Pavlyuk.

Subsequent events showed that the officials whom Zelensky entrusted with implementing his idea slightly adjusted it. On the "Green Country" website, they showed beautiful figures of planted trees, but upon closer examination, it turned out that it was not about creating new forests, but about renewing old, already existing forests. For example, during the spring planting in 2023, foresters reported the renewal of 11,988 hectares of forest, but only 542 hectares of new forests were created. In practice, this meant that the implementation of the president's project was going well, but the number of new forests is unlikely to increase significantly. Although Zelensky in his speech meant precisely the increase in forest areas.

Another megaproject of the president, which he announced in 2020, was related to the creation of a state airline – Ukrainian National Airlines (UNA). Zelensky even promised to allocate about \$100 million for the start of the new carrier. It is still unclear what prompted the president to propose such an idea. Passenger air transport is a complex and low-margin business. It is more than likely that if created, the state airline would almost immediately face the fate of "Ukrzaliznytsia" – the national railway company, which shows losses year after year. Ukraine's budget is not so wealthy as to launch projects that would need subsidizing, at least, several million dollars every year.

Some concern was raised by the fact that Zelensky's idea of creating Ukrainian National Airlines came against the backdrop of the impending bankruptcy of Ukraine's largest private airline – Ukraine International Airlines, better known as UIA, with the well-known Ihor Kolomoisky being its largest shareholder. For many years, UIA

operated quite successfully as the main airline carrier in Ukraine. Of course, many were dissatisfied with the fact that a domestic flight of 800 kilometers cost \$200, but there was no other choice.

Starting from 2015, UIA's affairs began to worsen. After the annexation of Crimea, the airline had to bypass Russian territory, which immediately made flights to Asia non-competitive. Then, in 2018, the state significantly simplified the conditions for low-cost airlines. As a result, Ukrainians began to fly massively to Europe via low-cost carriers. This was a heavy blow to UIA, as its business strategy was built on high prices and market monopolization. Gradually, Kolomoisky's airline began to accumulate debts to the state airport Boryspil and the air navigation services enterprise "Ukraeroruh". By the time of bankruptcy, UIA's total debt to the state reached \$100 million.

On February 15, 2022, nine days before the start of the full-scale war, Igor Kolomoisky expressed readiness to transfer part of UIA's shares to the state in exchange for the debts. An interesting proposition, considering that by February 2022, Kolomoisky's airline was almost worthless. Almost the entire UIA fleet belonged to foreign leasing companies, which withdrew their planes a few weeks before the Russian invasion. UIA's real estate was re-registered to other companies or sold through court orders of private creditors. Probably, the whole point of creating Ukrainian National Airlines was to buy out the debts of Kolomoisky's airline. Although there is no concrete evidence for this. Due to the onset of the war, the project was frozen.

Equally interesting is how Volodymyr Zelensky tried to find money for his castles in the air. In September 2021, during a visit to the USA, President Zelensky met with representatives of American business and presented his plan for the transformation of the Ukrainian economy. According to Forbes, foreigners were offered to allocate \$364 billion to Ukraine, of which \$178 billion as international aid. The project's expenditure items included various sectors of the economy. For example, the government wanted to receive \$12 billion for the construction of thermal power plants on biofuel, \$25 billion for decommissioning outdated coal power plants, building several nuclear power units, hydro, and wind power plants. Another \$28.8 billion was required for improving the existing oil and gas system. The list was huge, up to the construction of a presidential innovative university, for which Americans were offered to allocate \$100 million.

It is hard to imagine what relation American investors could have to this charity festival, as the plan for the transformation of Ukraine

was presented specifically to them. The presentation did not receive any practical continuation and only showed that the project authors have a rather superficial view of the investment business.

In July 2022, during the war, Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal presented a ten-year plan for the recovery of Ukraine at a conference in Lugano (Switzerland). According to the head of the government, implementing this project will require \$750 billion, part of which was proposed to be taken from Russian assets frozen in the West.

The content of the recovery plan generally resembled the document presented to Americans a year earlier, taking into account that a large part of the money will be spent on rebuilding destroyed infrastructure. The scale of the new project was indicated by, among other things, the proposal to allocate \$20 billion for the development of Ukrainian culture and sports.

The naivety with which the Ukrainian government sought financial aid is deceptive. This was stated at the Ukraine Recovery Forum conference at the London School of Economics by the former head of the National Bank of Ukraine, Valeriia Gontareva.

"Comments that can sometimes be heard from representatives of the Ukrainian authorities, in the spirit of, 'we need a trillion dollars,' surprise our partners. One of the representatives of a major donor to Ukraine noted that the world community, when, for example, helps a country affected by a natural disaster, does not just give money (and a trillion is seven pre-war GDPs of Ukraine), but helps to rebuild," said Gontareva.

Undoubtedly, Gontareva, as someone well acquainted with Ukrainian politics, hinted that it is not just about handing over huge sums of money to Zelensky and his friends. Part of it will simply be embezzled. Western countries should control the distribution of most of the funds allocated for the reconstruction of Ukraine themselves. Of course, some of the money will go to budgetary support. But the implementation of infrastructure projects should be strictly controlled by representatives of donor countries. Otherwise, at least 20-30% of the allocated funds will disappear.

As for Valeriia Gontareva, her story is quite instructive. As known, it was she who carried out the clean-up of the banking system of Ukraine in 2015-2016, as a result of which PrivatBank came under state control. Since Kolomoisky declared her his personal enemy, Gontareva was forced to leave Ukraine before Zelensky came to power. As it turned out later, this was a timely decision. On April 22,

2019, the day after the second round of the presidential elections and Volodymyr Zelensky's resounding victory, the General Prosecutor's Office of Ukraine summoned Valeriia Gontareva for interrogation to present her with a suspicion of committing a crime. By that time, the former head of the National Bank was already living in London, where she taught at the London School of Economics. In an interview with journalists, she called the prosecutor's office's demand political persecution and refused to come to Kyiv, stating that "anything could happen in Ukraine".

These fears were not unfounded. On the night of September 17, 2019, unknown persons burned down Valeriia Gontareva's house in the suburbs of Kyiv. Despite the noise in the press, the arsonists were never found. A month later, on the air of Kolomoisky's "1 + 1" TV channel, actors of the comedy show "Evening Kvartal" sang a mocking song "The house was burning, ablaze", the text of which was directly related to the former head of the National Bank.

The Prosecutor's Office repeatedly insisted on Gontareva's arrival in Ukraine. But they did not dare to declare her in international search. It was obvious to everyone that this story was personal revenge by Kolomoisky. Especially since the oligarch himself did not particularly hide it. On May 2, 2019, in an interview with Bihus Info, Ihor Kolomoisky stated that if necessary, Gontareva would be brought to Ukraine "privately".

"If she does not fly in, nothing terrible, we will bring her if it will be necessary... Privately," said Kolomoisky.

Pressure on Independent Media

Being an experienced specialist in the media sphere, Zelensky understood that his popularity largely rested on the loyalty of nationwide television channels. Poroshenko's story showed that charisma and the loyalty of the core electorate were not enough for victory. The voter must be in an atmosphere that creates the illusion of the absence of a viable alternative to the incumbent president. This is exactly what Putin did at the beginning of his first presidential term. And, as you see, he succeeded in eliminating all potential competitors.

Volodymyr Zelensky, as it turned out, has some traits of an authoritarian ruler. For example, he really dislikes criticism. One

might even say he hates it. As the former head of the President's Office Andriy Bohdan recalled, Zelensky even wrote to him at two in the morning to find out information about some little-known author of a critical post on Facebook. Bohdan was very surprised by this, as the former "Kvartal 95" comedian came to power using not only harsh criticism but also the most disgusting ways of mocking his opponents.

Zelensky's painful reaction to any criticism combined with a keen desire to prevent opposition media from accessing a wide audience. For example, in the first year of Volodymyr Zelensky's presidency, observers noted that he and his former business partner Ihor Kolomoisky negatively mentioned Tomas Fiala several times — a Czech investor who has been living and doing business in Ukraine for many years.

Who is Fiala? He is not yet an oligarch — his fortune is estimated at about \$200 million, which is not that much compared to others. He is not a friend of Poroshenko, he does not own a TV channel, and he is a foreigner living in Ukraine with a residence permit. But on closer examination of Tomas Fiala's personality, everything falls into place. Zelensky and Kolomoisky sensed danger because Fiala began to buy and open media resources. Over several years, he and his companies gained control over the "NV" magazine, its website, a radio station, and two financial news websites.

In Ukraine, there are cases when someone not from the ruling team owns a media holding. But if the owner of these media does not want problems, they must, at a minimum, demonstrate loyalty to the president. For example, the mayor of Lviv, Andriy Sadovyi, through his family, controls a small by Ukrainian standards TV channel 24, the news website Zaxid.net, and the Radio Lux network. He has no problems with licenses or tax inspections. And no criticism of Sadovyi himself has ever come from the president. It just so happened that the media resources of the mayor of Lviv are very loyal to Volodymyr Zelensky.

Unlike Andriy Sadovyi, Czech investor Tomas Fiala demonstrated an independent stance, although he cannot be considered opposition. Moreover, considering that his residency status in Ukraine prohibits political activity. But for Zelensky, the mere fact that a person not loyal to him had access to a large audience already posed a danger.

Fiala, obviously, realized that his independence in the media market began to worry the president, and in the near future, this could threaten his investment business. The problem was solved in a

somewhat unusual way for Ukraine. To guarantee the absence of problems from the authorities, in the autumn of 2021, Fiala bought one of the most influential political online newspaper — "Ukrainska Pravda". It was hardly necessary for him, both from an investment point of view and for expanding political influence. Especially since the new owner publicly promised not to interfere in the editorial policy of the site. However, the mere fact of owning "Ukrainska Pravda" removed all claims from Zelensky towards Fiala. Otherwise, the website could once again change its owner. And the popular site could get a new editor. Say, someone more friendly to Poroshenko or Medvedchuk.

In other words, it was a non-aggression and mutual understanding pact. "Ukrainska Pravda" remained neutral towards Zelensky (although they always had a dislike for Poroshenko, for example), and the president forgot Fiala's surname. Indeed, after the Czech became the owner of "Ukrainska Pravda", Volodymyr Zelensky never mentioned Tomas Fiala again in his press conferences and interviews.

As for the opposition, from the very beginning, the president deliberately limited its influence on the television market. And if the pressure on Medvedchuk's media holding could be easily explained by his connections with the Kremlin, then with the pro-Western opposition in the form of Poroshenko, it was necessary to come up with a different scheme. The war and martial law helped.

A month after the war began, the state regulator turned off three opposition TV channels loyal to Petro Poroshenko from cable networks and digital broadcasting: "Pryamiy", "5 Kanal", and "Espresso". They were left with only broadcasting on YouTube and some streaming services, which significantly narrowed the Ukrainian audience.

At the same time, the largest nationwide channels, controlled by oligarchs, joined the "Unified Marathon" — a state channel that broadcasts news and video reports around the clock, mainly about the situation in the country and military topics. The idea of this project was that channels "1 + 1", "ICTV", and "STB" would supply content in the form of news and television reports for the marathon, and the state would pay them for it.

Trying to establish control over the information space, Zelensky's team did not forget to earn money on state television. For example, in the state budget for 2024, the government allocated 170 million hryvnias (about \$4 million) for financing the parliamentary channel

"Rada". It turned out that two-thirds of this money was transferred without a tender to the private company "Kinokit", which belongs to the former deputy head of the President's Office, Kyrylo Tymoshenko. Instead of creating television content based on the "Rada" channel, its director signed a contract for content production with a private firm of a Presidential Office official.

Access to state funds allowed Zelensky's team to solve two problems at once. After limiting the opposition's influence on voters, they began financing unprofitable oligarchic TV channels at the expense of the state and created another corruption scheme for their own enrichment. The only requirement for the heads of the TV channels was simple: no criticism of the president.

In January 2024, almost simultaneously, two events related to criticism of Zelensky occurred in Kyiv. Two days after a journalist from the "Dzerkalo Tyzhnia" Yuriy Nikolov on one of the YouTube streams extremely negatively characterized the professional qualities of the president, unknown men tried to break into his apartment. They banged on the doors, shouted that they would send Nikolov to the front, called him a traitor and a provocateur. After that, the hooligans, filming everything on a phone camera, pasted leaflets with insults on the journalist's apartment door. About 15 minutes later, this video was published in the Telegram channel "Card Office", which often shares insiders from the President's Office.

A few days later, a video from a hidden camera in a hotel room was published online, showing journalists of the Bihus Info project using drugs at a private New Year's party. This project has long been known for its anti-corruption investigations, and its YouTube channel has about a million subscribers. Several months before the appearance of the video with drugs, the journalists of Bihus Info released several videos on their channel with investigations into the corruption of Zelensky's associates.

Despite President Zelensky's public condemnation of pressure on journalists, the customers of both incidents were never found. Notably, such practices of persecuting journalists with the involvement of special services were widely spread during the presidency of Yanukovych.

Reasons for the Conflict with Kyiv Mayor Vitali Klitschko

The longstanding conflict between Volodymyr Zelensky and Kyiv Mayor Vitali Klitschko dates back several years before Zelensky's triumphant victory in 2019. Starting in 2014, when Klitschko was first elected as the mayor of Kyiv, the performers of "Kvartal 95" crudely parodied the former world boxing champion, depicting him in their shows as a dumb athlete. Moreover, they did it very often. Naturally, the capital's mayor hardly appreciated this.

In an interview with Ukrainian journalist Sonya Koshkina, Vitali Klitschko confirmed that he had encountered Zelensky by chance at parties among mutual friends several times and expressed his displeasure about the parodies. Zelensky, in response, always explained it as just that type of humor. Either way, personal animosity arose between them.

After the 2019 election victory, the new president Zelensky tried to extend his influence over Kyiv, so Vitali Klitschko was offered cooperation. According to the mayor, the head of the President's Office, Andriy Bohdan, approached him with a request that Klitschko coordinate all his actions in the capital with one of two people of his choice: major developer Andriy Vavrysh or the head of the "1+1" TV channel, Olexandr Tkachenko.

The mayor refused the offer and even held a press conference, where he talked about the call from the head of the President's Office:

"I clearly asked: please tell me, Mr. Bohdan, what official positions do they hold (Vavrysh and Tkachenko), and what key roles are they supposed to play in consultations on the various steps that take place in our city?" – Klitschko reported.

Essentially, this was a declaration of war. It seemed that Zelensky, buoyed by his popularity, would easily deal with the capital's mayor. Especially since there were only a few months left until the local elections in Kyiv. But the reality was somewhat different. Klitschko was also popular among voters. If not in the entire country, then definitely in the capital. Big money circulates in Kyiv, a part of which, in the form of taxes, goes into the city budget. Having the ability to manage large financial resources, the mayor improved urban infrastructure. In other words, billions in the city budget solved many

problems. Kyivans saw positive changes and were generally satisfied with their mayor. Compared to other Ukrainian cities, Kyiv always looked very attractive.

Besides Klitschko's popularity, Zelensky faced another problem: he did not have a suitable candidate who could win the elections in Kyiv for him. There were many who wanted to become mayor from "Servant of the People": Mykola Tyschenko, Olexandr Dubinsky, Olexandr Tkachenko, and Iryna Vereshchuk. But Tyschenko and Dubinsky were trailed by a series of scandals. And Tkachenko and Vereshchuk, despite all the support from Kolomoisky's TV channel, lacked enough charisma to compete with Klitschko.

Eventually, Zelensky chose Vereshchuk, who disastrously lost the Kyiv mayor election, only securing fifth place with 5.44% of the vote. Klitschko was re-elected for a new term. And with a huge advantage: more than 50% of voters voted for him.

A similar situation occurred in the elections for the Kyiv City Council. Petro Poroshenko's "European Solidarity" party and Klitschko's "UDAR" party formed a majority of 61 deputies. The pro-presidential "Servant of the People" party received only 12 seats in the city council.

The election results significantly reduced Zelensky's possibilities to fight Klitschko for power in Kyiv. But he was not ready to give up. There are at least three known instances when the president intended to illegally dismiss Klitschko from the position of head of the Kyiv City State Administration. According to the Constitution of Ukraine, the mayor elected by Kyivans automatically becomes the head of the Kyiv City Council and holds the position of head of the city state administration. Zelensky was not deterred by the constitutional contradiction, but he was daunted by the prospect of a conflict with city council deputies.

Dismissing Klitschko as head of the administration, the president could do nothing about the fact that he would still remain the elected mayor of the city. The main financial resources in Kyiv are distributed during city council sessions, which are chaired by the mayor. Appointing his own appointee as head of the administration, Zelensky would only have escalated the conflict to a new level. Issues related to construction and land plots would still have to be resolved through Klitschko and his deputies.

In December 2021, a meeting took place between Klitschko and Zelensky, during which the president offered the mayor to exit the

coalition with Poroshenko's party in the city council. The head of state also asked Klitschko not to run in the upcoming presidential elections. Regarding the first offer, Zelensky received a refusal, and as for plans to become president, Klitschko turned it into a joke.

After this meeting, Vitali Klitschko and Volodymyr Zelensky have not met once in two years. As the Kyiv mayor assures, they have not even spoken on the phone since the war began. Deep personal animosity still exists between them.

Why Putin Attacked Ukraine

The reasons for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine can likely be divided into two separate groups: those that formed Putin's steadfast desire to annex Ukrainian territories to Russia, and those that influenced the decision that the time had come.

It's no secret that Vladimir Putin had long contemplated the annexation of Ukraine, well before Zelensky, Poroshenko, and Yanukovych's flight. The first alarming signals appeared in 2003, during the conflict around Tuzla Island. The Tuzla situation showed that the Russian president did not rule out the possibility of resolving contentious issues with Ukraine through the use of force. I remind you that Kuchma and Putin de-escalated this border dispute only after Ukrainian paratroopers were moved to Tuzla Island when the situation was a step away from gunfire between both shores of the Kerch Strait.

Five years later, in April 2008, during a closed meeting of the Russia-NATO Council, Vladimir Putin openly hinted to George W. Bush Jr. that if Ukraine joined the North Atlantic Alliance, the country might lose its statehood. In his aggressive rhetoric, the Russian president completely ignored that Ukraine was then headed by Leonid Kuchma, who was entirely loyal to him, and there were no "Banderites" or "neo-Nazis" in power in Kyiv.

Then, as known, the patient's condition began to deteriorate. Putin became increasingly embittered, and in February 2014, he decided to use Yanukovych's flight to annex Crimea. Most experts believe that in his attitude towards the Ukrainian issue, the Kremlin master was drowned in a cocktail, the main component of which were imperial ambitions. Other components of this drink included: nostalgia for the USSR, resentment over NATO's expansion to Eastern European

countries, incompetence, delusions of grandeur, and the recognition of Kosovo's independence.

The latter precedent, in Putin's opinion, untied his hands, as the recognition of Kosovo's independence by the USA and other Western countries violated the 1975 Helsinki Pact on the inviolability of European states' borders. The cherry on top was the famous quote by Zbigniew Brzezinski that Russia without Ukraine can never become an empire. In the late 90s, his book "The Grand Chessboard" was a big hit, both in Ukraine and Russia. And, of course, it made an impression on Putin.

There was a whole list of reasons why Putin needed Ukraine. This country is one of the few that possesses a full aircraft manufacturing cycle, has technologies and industrial capacities for space rocket engineering, is among the top ten largest world metallurgy producers, and is one of the biggest food exporters. Moreover, it's a vast human resource that could fuel Russia's demography and economy for decades.

Another reason for the war was the desire to prevent Ukraine from integrating into the European Union. A rich, successful, and democratic Ukraine is Putin's worst nightmare. He simply could not allow Ukrainians to live better than Russians. The Russian president could "overlook" the successful transformation of Eastern European countries, but Ukraine's success would have been the worst reminder of his own incompetence.

There is no country in the world richer in natural resources than Russia. It owns vast deposits of gold, diamonds, oil, gas, and non-ferrous metals. With the money earned only from the export of raw materials abroad, Russia could build several new cities, no worse than Dubai. But all Putin achieved after 23 years of his rule is a minimum wage for Russians at the level of \$200 a month.

It wasn't even about joining NATO. The whole story's goal is merely the conquest or destruction of Ukraine. Estonia has long been a NATO member, and the distance between the Estonian border and Saint Petersburg is only 125 kilometers. That's almost four times less than the distance from the Ukrainian border to Moscow. Therefore, Putin's rhetoric about "NATO aircraft flight time" or "NATO troops at Russia's borders" is an argument aimed only at the domestic audience.

In April 2014, when Putin, after the annexation of Crimea, began a hybrid war in the east and south of Ukraine, he hoped to capture several regions with little bloodshed. But the "Russian spring" failed

everywhere except Donbas. And even there, things did not go as planned. Hybrid methods, effectively used in Crimea, stopped working, and by summer, the situation escalated into a low-intensity armed conflict.

A full-scale war was not in Vladimir Putin's plans at that time. He later mentioned this in 2023 as his big mistake. Although in August 2014, the Russian president used the Russian regular army to defeat Ukrainian forces near Ilovaisk, the legend of the "Donbas people's uprising" was used up until the start of the full-scale invasion. Putin harbored the hope that he could still bring Ukraine back into Russia's sphere of influence through political means.

It's worth noting that even two weeks before the war began, most politicians in Ukraine did not believe in the possibility of a large-scale invasion, so incredible was the very thought of it. Not only Zelensky, but even Poroshenko and Tymoshenko. It just didn't fit any rational logic. Everyone understood that the situation now was completely different from 2014, and Russia would face catastrophic consequences in the event of a war. But Ukrainian politicians did not account for Putin's hatred of Ukraine, capable of irrational actions. He is an authoritarian dictator, for whom even the death of tens of thousands of citizens means little.

Perhaps, had Putin been an evil genius, everything would have worked out for him. And Ukraine, except for the "irreparably nationalist" western regions, would already have been divided into three or four new federal districts of the Russian Federation. But Putin is not an evil genius. The most accurate description of him was given by the former head of the Central Bank of Russia, Viktor Geraschenko: "Putin is an ordinary C-student." Mediocrity, who reached the top only because Boris Berezovsky chose him once.

In his attitude towards Ukraine, Putin repeatedly made two big mistakes. He overestimated the Soviet past and did not consider the local specifics of Ukrainian politics. Putin believed that Ukraine was still a former Soviet republic that accidentally and undeservedly gained independence. And his historical mission was to correct this mistake.

There's a version that the capture of Ukraine was supposed to be the first step towards other wars. And that Ukraine was of interest to Putin primarily as a source of resources: economic, logistical, and, most importantly, human, for further expansion into Eastern Europe. The Russian president was not actually prepared for a full-scale war.

He sincerely believed it would be a two-week special operation, similar to the annexation of Crimea or the suppression of the "Prague Spring" in 1968. And further on, after absorbing Ukraine, Putin could use this additional resource for a full-scale war with NATO.

Ukrainians were prepared to play the role of cannon fodder in this plan. They, along with the Buryats and Tuvans, were supposed to storm Riga, Warsaw, or even Berlin as part of the Russian army.

This is just one of the versions. An argument against it is that according to the military action plan that fell into the hands of Ukrainian military, the Russian army did not intend to occupy the western regions of Ukraine. Russians feared that the presence of "hostile population" there could turn into a guerrilla war. According to Putin's plan, Western Ukraine was to become a pro-Russian protectorate headed by a new Vichy regime or go to Poland after the division of spheres of influence between Russia and the West. Transcarpathia would come under Hungarian control. This is how the "new Yalta," in Putin's understanding, was supposed to look.

We do not know what was really in Putin's mind when he planned this adventure. One thing is for certain — he greatly overestimated the capabilities of his country and his army.

Zelensky's Father Triggers a Chain Reaction

Before the war began, the Kremlin paid significant attention to disinformation about the reasons for the attack on Ukraine. According to the rules of Russian propaganda, there must be a lot of lies. This is necessary to confuse the target audience. People should choose not between lies and truth, but between different versions of lies. This makes it harder for them to get to the real reasons or events.

Trying to explain the upcoming aggression against its neighbor, Putin offered his compatriots to believe in the scary American biolabs on Ukrainian territory, the rise of neo-Nazism, the need to protect the population of Donbas, NATO expansion, and even Ukraine's attempts to create a nuclear bomb. A few days before the invasion, Russian special services staged several shellings of their territory supposedly by Ukraine. But this Gleiwitz incident was done so clumsily and shoddily that not even Russian Z-patriots believed it.

In fact, Putin's decision to start a full-scale war was influenced by entirely different factors. The first (but not the main) of these was

Zelensky's victory in the presidential elections in April 2019.

The Kremlin really wanted Zelensky to win. President Poroshenko, despite all his flaws, consistently pursued a policy that Putin did not like. He strengthened the Ukrainian army, under him the economy grew for 30 consecutive months, he achieved autocephaly for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and visa-free travel for citizens to the European Union. If the situation continued at this pace, Ukraine could well receive a roadmap for joining the EU by the end of the second presidential term.

In anticipation of the presidential elections, in March 2019, the chief editor of the Russian radio station "Echo of Moscow," Alexey Venediktov, stated that Putin is satisfied with any president of Ukraine who would make the country weaker.

"I understand that anyone but Poroshenko. In my opinion, speaking of our, pro-Russian candidate for president of Ukraine, we have Mr. Chaos. The more chaos, the weaker the candidate, the more Putin thinks it is beneficial for Russia. We do not have our own candidate: Tymoshenko, Zelensky, Boyko, some other people – it does not matter. Mr. Chaos satisfies us," said Venediktov.

Of course, Zelensky's victory itself was not one of the reasons for the war. But it created the necessary conditions. An incompetent president of Ukraine was Putin's hope that Poroshenko's policy towards Europe would, at the very least, slow down. It would also be desirable for the new president to improve relations with Russia. To begin with, it would be good for Ukraine to forget about Crimea and come to terms with the separatist authorities in Donbas.

The maximum program for Putin envisaged appointing Viktor Medvedchuk as the head of the government or the return to power of former President Viktor Yanukovych. Either way, but Venediktov was right: to begin with, the Russian leadership very much wanted the situation in Ukraine to worsen.

For some time, Putin waited. He hoped that he would somehow be able to expand the political influence of Ukrainian parties loyal to the Kremlin. For this, at the next parliamentary elections in Ukraine, pro-Russian parties had to get the percentage of votes that would allow them to claim participation in the parliamentary coalition. If this succeeded, then Medvedchuk could hope to become the speaker of the parliament or vice-premier. Putin really hoped to return representatives of pro-Russian forces to the executive power of Ukraine.

To strengthen Medvedchuk's influence, Putin gifted his wife – former TV presenter Oksana Marchenko – the right to develop one of the three largest oil fields in Russia, the Gavrikovskoye field in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug. According to Putin's plan, Marchenko's Cypriot company would extract oil in Russia, sell it, and use the proceeds to buy and finance TV channels in Ukraine.

For some time, this scheme worked successfully. Even under Poroshenko, Medvedchuk began to buy up information TV channels. In a relatively short time through front men, he became the owner of the television channels NewsOne, ZIK, and "112 Ukraine". In November 2019, already under Zelensky, Medvedchuk opened two more TV channels: "First Independent" and UkrLive.

Notably, all pro-Russian media resources, including Medvedchuk's channels, ruthlessly criticized Poroshenko before the presidential election and assessed Zelensky's prospects quite neutrally. This continued after the new president was elected. The criticism of Poroshenko was meant to maximally reduce the percentage of his party in the upcoming parliamentary elections. Zelensky was still being observed, obviously, in the calculation of possible participation in a future coalition and government formation.

Everything changed on July 22, 2019, after the vote count in the snap elections to the Verkhovna Rada. The pro-Russian bloc of parties "Opposition Platform – For Life" got not so little: 13.05% of the votes. This allowed them to bring 43 deputies into parliament. However, Shariy's party, another pro-Kremlin force, did not overcome the 5-percent barrier in the 2019 parliamentary elections, receiving only 2.23% of the votes.

The real triumphator of the snap parliamentary elections was the pro-presidential party "Servant of the People," which for the first time in the history of Ukraine managed to form a mono-majority. Zelensky's party received 43.16% of the votes. Together with deputies elected in single-mandate constituencies, this was enough to form a majority without the participation of other parties. This meant that Putin's desire to influence the decisions of the Ukrainian government would not be realized, at least for the next 4 years.

Since Medvedchuk and Boyko no longer hoped to get positions in the government or even in the leadership of the parliament, pro-Russian TV channels began to gradually criticize the president. It is worth mentioning again that Zelensky is very sensitive to criticism. He simply hated any critical statements about himself, broadcasted from

the TV channels of Poroshenko and Medvedchuk. But since Poroshenko belongs to the pro-Western opposition and has quite a high authority, including in Washington and European capitals, his media resources cannot be simply shut down, as somewhere in Venezuela or Azerbaijan. This would immediately cause a scandal and accusations of oppressing freedom of speech. The President of Ukraine, as we know, positions himself as a democratic leader.

But if the TV channels of the hated Poroshenko cannot be shut down, then this prohibition does not apply to Medvedchuk's channels. Viktor Medvedchuk made a big mistake. He somehow began to think that his status as "Putin's godfather" and the unofficial representative of the Kremlin in Ukraine gave him certain privileges that Zelensky would not dare to violate. But it turned out that the Ukrainian president is absolutely indifferent to this status.

Zelensky did not want to tolerate and watch how Medvedchuk's propagandists systematically destroy his rating from their TV screens. The first year of his presidency, on the wave of fantastically high popularity among the people, he could still ignore this. However, criticism on TV screens was increasing, including news stories about corruption in power. The last straw was information that Zelensky's father was very upset by journalists' attacks on his son. Moreover, it was about Medvedchuk's TV channels, which Olexandr Zelensky liked to watch until a certain time. There were even rumors that the president's father had a heart attack because of this.

On February 2, 2021, the president initiated a decision by the National Security and Defense Council to impose sanctions against people's deputy Taras Kozak, TV channels "112 Ukraine", NewsOne, and ZIK. Kozak fell under sanctions because he was formally the owner of these TV channels, not Medvedchuk or his wife Oksana Marchenko. A similar ownership scheme existed for Poroshenko's channel. Until 2021, "Pryamiy" was registered to the former head of the Kyiv City Administration, Volodymyr Makeenko, although Poroshenko actually managed everything.

It is interesting how the father of the Ukrainian president reacted to the sanctions and the shutdown of Medvedchuk's TV channels. The next day, Olexandr Zelensky told journalists that he supports the ban on TV channels "112 Ukraine", NewsOne, and ZIK, because their rhetoric does not correspond to reality.

"The way they pour dirt on him, there's nothing like it in any country... They pour the dirtiest dirt... They say, for instance,

corruption has increased sixfold. But you look at the international results – it's risen by three ranks," said the elder Zelensky.

The closure of Viktor Medvedchuk's TV channels had far-reaching consequences. With his decision, Volodymyr Zelensky showed Putin that, unlike Poroshenko, he would not allow propagandists to destroy his rating and destabilize the political situation. Of course, the master of the Kremlin understood that the lack of media support puts an end to his plans to bring pro-Russian forces to power in Ukraine. In other words, Putin lost the last illusions that Medvedchuk could ever take a high post in the Ukrainian government.

Should pro-Russian TV channels have been closed? Of course, but only if you have a strong army and are ready for the consequences. It was long clear that Medvedchuk is a traitor, and his media projects are funded by Russia. But Zelensky hardly thought about the long-term consequences and definitely was not prepared for a possible escalation of military actions. Since the Ukrainian president lacked sufficient experience in international politics and surrounded himself with equally incompetent friends, he seemed to think that everything would somehow calm down. Zelensky's logic was childishly simple and naive: war benefits no one, so Putin will not start it.

The Perfect Moment for Putin

As is well known, a driver consuming alcohol can lead to a car accident. Probably, no one would deny this statement. But if you drink 100 or 150 grams of brandy, vodka, or some other strong drink half an hour before driving, it does not mean that you will definitely get into an accident. No, a combination of conditions must arise that leads to a traffic accident.

Suppose a drunk driver is a risk that accounts for 20% of this sum. Speeding – another 20%, poor visibility on the road – 10%, slippery roads – 20%, and finally, the sudden appearance of another road user – the last 30%. That's it! Bingo! Four or even three components are enough for you to get into an accident. But if you have only one component, and the other conditions are absent, then you are likely to make it home safely.

At the time of writing, the war continues, and martial law in Ukraine imposes certain restrictions on criticizing the actions of the authorities. Therefore, Ukrainian society does not fully understand the

reasons for the Russian invasion and the catastrophic events of the first month of the war. The closure of Medvedchuk's TV channels is only one of the reasons why Putin decided to attack Ukraine. And not even the main one.

Zelensky could not only shut down pro-Russian TV channels – he could even give Medvedchuk a life sentence for treason with the help of his pocket judges. And even then, the war would not necessarily have started. But there is one condition: if only Ukraine had a strong army and was ready for defense.

Subsequent events showed that the incompetent actions of the Ukrainian president and the fabulous corruption with state finances were precisely the mechanism that let the genie out of the bottle. Putin and his subordinates closely watched the situation in Ukraine. And, obviously, in the second half of 2020, the Russian leader decided to prepare for an attack. The closure of Medvedchuk's TV channels only strengthened his confidence that this had to be done before Zelensky left office.

There is a whole complex of reasons why the war started. The first has already been mentioned. Putin missed the opportunity to influence Ukrainian politics by political means. The closure of television channels belonging to Viktor Medvedchuk drastically reduced the chances of pro-Russian forces in the next elections.

The next reason for the war is the failed preparation for defense. The state defense order for 2020 in Ukraine was disrupted. By the end of September 2020, the Ministry of Defense had not used more than 20 billion hryvnias for the purchase of weapons and equipment repair. For the first time in several years, the 2021 state budget reduced funding for the army. The government and the Minister of Defense of Ukraine appointed by Zelensky, Andriy Taran, cut or sabotaged army rearment programs. The production program for "Vilkha" missiles was stopped. The state did not allocate funding for the Pavlohrad Chemical Plant, which produces rocket fuel. As a result, the plant was shut down, and 687 workers were laid off.

The catastrophic state of the Ukrainian army on the eve of the war is evidenced by the fact that for three years (2019 - 2022), the government did not purchase a single shell for the Armed Forces. Therefore, just a few days after the full-scale invasion, Ukraine was forced to ask Western countries for urgent help in supplying artillery shells. Before the war, the president and his entourage were much more interested in financing their megaproject "Big Construction".

Unlike the army, here the state generously allocated tens of billions of hryvnias to private companies.

The third reason is the fall of the pro-American government in Afghanistan. The lightning-fast victory of the Taliban and Kabul surrendered without a fight greatly inspired the Kremlin. Russian propagandists began to broadcast on their media platforms dreams of how Ukrainian officials would fight for seats on planes flying to the West from Boryspil. The scenario in which Zelensky's power would collapse just as Ashraf Ghani's government did was taken quite seriously in Moscow.

The fourth reason for the war is the gross errors of Russian intelligence in analyzing the situation in Ukraine. We do not know exactly what role intelligence data played in Putin's decision. It is possible that some Russian analysts were skeptical about the possibility of repeating the Afghan scenario of 2021. But Putin decided to rely on the data he liked more. They suggested that Ukraine's resistance would last no more than a few days.

Of course, Putin considered himself a great expert on the Ukrainian issue. But now it is clear to everyone that he made a mistake, not the first one. Both in 2004 during the first Maidan and in 2014 during the second Maidan, he underestimated the level of self-organization of Ukrainian society and stubbornly refused to take into account local specifics. Putin somehow always uses the Soviet template. He still thinks that the situation in Ukraine is similar to the Russian one, as it was decades ago in the times of the USSR.

Indeed, Ukrainians are very similar to Russians. However, there are significant differences, not only in mentality but, more importantly, in social relations. Over 30 years of independence, powerful civil and political institutions have emerged in Ukraine, preventing the establishment of authoritarianism and a return to the Russia-centric development model.

Putin underestimated the influence of Western Ukraine, which several times played the role of "Ukrainian Piedmont," a catalyst for national revival, in the country's history. He underestimated the role of Ukrainian churches (the Kyiv Patriarchate, which later transformed into the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, and the Greek Catholic Church). Putin did not pay attention to the presence in Ukraine of powerful democratic forces represented in parliament. Finally, he did not consider the influence of Ukrainian oligarchs.

All these reasons are absent in Russia. There is no region there

where a quarter of the population lives and which completely rejects the Eurasian development vector. There is no hint of an independent public stance of the Russian Orthodox Church. And, of course, in Russia, the democratic opposition has long been unrepresented in parliament, and the oligarchs have clearly learned the rule not to play politics.

The Russian Scenario Explained

The scenario for the capture of Ukraine was envisioned as a special operation, similar to the suppression of the "Prague Spring" in 1968. This is evidenced by the military plans of the Russian army, which, along with prisoners, fell into the hands of Ukrainian military a few weeks after the war began.

On February 21, 2022, three days before the invasion, the command of the 34th Separate Motor Rifle Brigade of the Russian army, which was to advance from Crimea, briefed the personnel on the plan for "performing special (combat) tasks on the territory of foreign states." According to this document, the Russians intended to capture Mykolaiv and land troops near Odesa within five days. By the ninth day, they aimed to capture Bilhorod-Dnistrovskyi and reach the border with Romania. And by the morning of the 11th day of the war, reach the border with Moldova and establish their posts there. Naturally, this plan did not anticipate any prolonged battles with the Ukrainian army.

A similar "blitzkrieg" plan existed for the direction of Kyiv. According to the First Deputy Minister of Defense of Ukraine, Lieutenant General Oleksandr Pavlyuk, the Russians intended to capture Kyiv within three to five days. They planned to use special operations forces and airborne troops to seize the Gostomel and Vasylkiv airports near Kyiv. Simultaneously, the enemy aimed to destroy the air defense around the capital, command posts of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the National Guard, and critical infrastructure objects through missile and air strikes.

After capturing the airports, additional forces were to be continuously landed on their runways using military transport aircraft. Then, the Russian army intended to capture the government district in the center of Kyiv, eliminate or arrest the country's leadership, and establish a puppet pro-Russian regime in Ukraine. Putin's triumph would have been a military parade of the Russian army on Kyiv's main

street – Khreshchatyk.

Most likely, the Kremlin planned to return former President Yanukovych to power in Ukraine and declare all legislative acts adopted by the Verkhovna Rada after his flight on February 20, 2014, invalid. The District Administrative Court of Kyiv, which had suddenly decided to consider Yanukovych's lawsuit on the illegality of his dismissal a few weeks before the war began, was expected to provide invaluable assistance to the occupiers. Obviously, the court was supposed to create a legitimate basis for the restoration of the fugitive president's power.

Next, Yanukovych was to sign several agreements with Russia: recognizing Russian sovereignty over Crimea and Donbas, and a military and political alliance between Ukraine and Russia. It is quite possible that Putin had additional conditions, about which we do not know. And finally, after a few weeks or months, Yanukovych was to resign and transfer power to Viktor Medvedchuk. During this time, the old composition of the Verkhovna Rada was to appoint Medvedchuk as its speaker. According to the Ukrainian Constitution, the speaker of the parliament becomes the acting president in case of his resignation or death.

Putin and Medvedchuk's further plans are unknown to us. Most likely, they planned the full integration of Ukraine into Russia, similar to the unification of East and West Germany. A separate scenario was being prepared for the western Ukrainian regions.

It is evident that there was also a Plan B if the Ukrainian army continued to resist and, after the fall of Kyiv, began to retreat to Western Ukraine. Although we do not know this plan, there is unofficial information that the front line was supposed to stop at the administrative borders of the western Ukrainian regions. This is explained by two reasons. First, Putin was allegedly frightened by the prospect of battling a new "Banderite" underground movement for many years, as happened under Stalin in the 1940s and 50s. Second, the population of Western Ukraine, having far fewer cultural ties with Russians, would have hindered the rapid Russification of the rest of the population.

Western Ukraine was likely to become a Russian protectorate similar to the "Vichy regime" in France. However, who was supposed to take on the role of Marshal Pétain remains a mystery.

There are substantial reasons to believe that in the event of capturing Ukraine, complete assimilation among Russians was

prepared for the Ukrainians. Socially active citizens involved in pro-Ukrainian activities were expected to face, at a minimum, arrest. The implementation of this scenario could be observed in the occupied territories of the South and East of Ukraine. The first thing the Russians started in the captured cities and villages was the search and detention of citizens with a pro-Ukrainian stance. Then, a few weeks later, Ukrainian books, including fiction, were removed from school and city libraries. The school education process was switched to Russian language and textbooks.

Unlike Soviet leaders, who guaranteed Ukrainians minimal national rights, Putin has repeatedly stated that Lenin's idea was mistaken. The current President of Russia has long lived in an imperial delusion, in which Ukrainians as a separate nation simply do not exist. Therefore, it is entirely understandable that the destruction of Ukrainian books and Ukrainian-language education logically fits into this theory, as the presence of literature in one's own language is one of the signs of a nation.

The Final Preparations for War

In March 2021, American intelligence noticed a massive deployment of Russian troops near the borders of Ukraine, numbering up to 120,000 personnel. According to John Kirby, the spokesperson for the United States Department of Defense, this was the largest concentration of Russian military forces near Ukraine since 2014. The unexpected activity of the Russians forced the United States European Command (EUCOM) to change the assessment level of the situation between Ukraine and Russia from a "potential crisis" to a "potential crisis that could occur in the near future" at the end of March 2021.

On April 13, 2021, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu for the first time acknowledged the troop movements to the borders of Ukraine. He stated that for the purpose of checking combat readiness following the winter training period, two combined arms armies and three airborne forces units were additionally deployed to the western borders of the Russian Federation.

According to an analysis by the Ukrainian National Institute for Strategic Studies, published in September 2021, the spring activity of the Russian Armed Forces near the borders of Ukraine was explained by their practicing the possibility of a sudden strike to block Ukraine's access to the Black Sea. Or, at least, they were preparing to implement

a plan to encircle Ukrainian troops in eastern Ukraine. For this, the Russian army had to strike from two sides: from the northern border and from Crimea.

Experts believe that Putin decided to conduct large-scale maneuvers not only to train his army but also to send a signal to the new President Biden about his desire to negotiate. He achieved this: at the end of May 2021, the presidents of Russia and the United States agreed to meet in Geneva. The talks took place on June 16, and sources in the White House called them "constructive."

According to The Washington Post, the first alarm bell rang a month after the meeting in Geneva: in July 2021, when Putin's article "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" was published on the official Kremlin website. Mostly, the content of this essay consisted of a brief interpretation of history and assessment of the relations between Russia and Ukraine. However, the text then included a message that Soviet leaders had transferred territories to Ukraine that historically did not belong to it, and therefore Russia was essentially robbed. At the end of the article, Putin began to make veiled threats: "We will never allow our historical territories to be used against Russia. And to those who would attempt such a thing, I want to say that by doing so, they will destroy their country."

American analysts did not like the tone of the author of this article, prompting intelligence to step up its activities in Russia. The result was the conclusion that Russia was indeed preparing for a full-scale war with Ukraine. President Biden was informed of Putin's plans in October 2021.

Zelensky received the first information that Putin was preparing to attack Ukraine a few weeks after Biden was informed. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken informed the Ukrainian president of the Kremlin's intentions during a personal meeting at the climate change conference in Glasgow. This happened in early November 2021.

Less than two weeks after the meeting in Glasgow, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba and Head of the President's Office Andriy Yermak visited Washington. Recalling the visit, Kuleba mentioned that a high-ranking American official greeted them with a cup of coffee and a smile at the U.S. State Department.

"Guys, dig trenches," the official began. "When we smiled in response, the official said: I'm serious. Start digging trenches... You will be attacked. A major attack, and you must prepare for it."

According to Kuleba, he and Yermak asked for details, but "there were none." Later, the Ukrainian Foreign Minister even claimed that the Americans did not provide them with specific intelligence data "up to the last 4-5 days before the invasion began."

Kuleba's statement should be taken with great skepticism since as early as December 2021, three months before the invasion, Putin's plan was published on the website of the German tabloid newspaper Bild and was actively discussed not only by experts but also by journalists and bloggers.

Comparing the map of the likely advance of Russian troops published on December 4 in Bild and the real directions of the invasion into Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022, they are almost identical. Attempts to encircle Kyiv from two sides, including from the direction of Belarus, the attack from Crimea, the strike towards Kharkiv, the attack in the occupied part of the Luhansk region, and the strike on Volnovakha were confirmed. The only difference between the two plans was the absence of a naval landing in Odesa. The Russians did not dare to undertake such a complex and risky operation.

Thus, three months before the war began, Putin's plan was already posted on the internet. This means that the Office of Zelensky was familiar with this plan, at least in November, four months before the invasion. There was enough time to prepare, but nothing was done.

And what about Putin and the Americans? It would be a mistake to think that President Biden's administration simply watched as Russia prepared to attack Ukraine. At the end of October 2021, the White House requested a meeting between CIA Director William Burns and Putin.

On November 2, Burns flew to Moscow and was taken to the Kremlin office of Yuri Ushakov, Putin's foreign policy advisor and former ambassador to the U.S. The Russian president refused a personal meeting and decided to speak with the CIA director by phone.

Initially, the Kremlin master complained about NATO expansion, the security threat to Russia, and Ukraine's illegitimate leadership.

"He spoke very disparagingly about President Zelensky as a political leader," Burns recalls.

After listening to Putin's brief lecture, Burns conveyed the White

House's message: "The United States knows what you have planned, and if you invade Ukraine, you will pay a huge price." He also left a letter from Biden, in which he confirmed the extremely negative consequences for Russia of any attack on Ukraine.

In the conversation with Burns, Putin did not deny the accuracy of intelligence data indicating the preparation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. According to the CIA director, Putin had not yet made an irreversible decision to start the war at that time, but his views on Ukraine had hardened, and his appetite for risk had increased.

How did the Americans learn about Putin's decision to start the war? At the end of 2023, interesting information circulated among Russian military bloggers. It turned out that the commander of the Russian Airborne Forces, General Mikhail Teplinsky, from October 2021 to January 2022, actively sold shares of Russian companies he owned. This suggests that in October or even at the end of September 2021, Putin informed senior Russian generals about the inevitability of war with Ukraine. Obviously, at this stage, when at least 10-20 people knew about the impending war, there was a leak, which reached American intelligence.

The Kremlin's Ultimatum

In November and December 2021, Vladimir Putin, his diplomats, and propagandists conducted an information campaign that was supposed to provide Russian citizens with a legitimate explanation for the upcoming invasion of Ukraine. Russians were meant to understand that the forthcoming war was not aggressive on Russia's part but, on the contrary, Russia was defending itself against aggression from the West and the Nazi regime of Ukraine. A key element of Putin's information campaign was a list of demands that he presented to the leadership of the USA and other NATO countries.

On November 18, speaking at the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vladimir Putin accused Ukraine of "demonstratively failing" to fulfill the Minsk agreements, and France and Germany of facilitating this. Putin also outlined the content of future demands for the first time: "The question needs to be raised about achieving serious long-term security guarantees for Russia."

On December 1, during the ceremony of receiving diplomatic credentials from foreign ambassadors, Putin stated that obtaining

"security guarantees" from the West was the top priority for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "We need legal, juridical guarantees, since our Western colleagues did not fulfill their corresponding verbal commitments."

On December 2, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov presented the first demands to the West in Stockholm. He first declared that "Ukraine is being militarily pumped up" and "the terrible scenario of military confrontation is returning." Lavrov then moved on to threats: "ignoring Russia's legitimate concerns will have the most serious consequences." Although Russia "does not want any conflicts," "every state has the right to choose ways to ensure its legitimate interests in the sphere of security."

On December 10, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a press release proposing to cancel the decision of the NATO Bucharest summit in 2008, which stated that "Ukraine and Georgia will become members of NATO."

On December 15, Putin handed over to Karen Donfried, Assistant Secretary of State of the USA, proposals on "security guarantees" that Russia wants to receive from Washington. Two days later, on December 17, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs published on its website a draft of the future document titled "Treaty between the Russian Federation and the United States of America on Security Guarantees."

The future document was of an ultimatum nature. Specifically, it demanded the USA to refrain from creating military bases in the countries of the former USSR and to cease any military cooperation with them. Moreover, the United States was to not only refrain from further NATO expansion to the east but also withdraw all its armed forces from the territories of countries that became NATO members after 1997. This list included not only the Baltic states but almost all of Eastern Europe, including Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary.

Of course, the text of the ultimatum deliberately contained conditions that were impossible to meet. Putin was preparing to quickly capture Kyiv, and this document was needed only to have a reason to start the war.

Kazakhstan, the Olympics, and a Casus Belli

According to American intelligence, the invasion of Ukraine was planned for January 2022. However, on January 2, massive unrest broke out in neighboring Kazakhstan due to a sharp increase in liquefied gas prices. Within a few days, protests spread to the country's largest cities. There was a risk of overthrowing the government, which at the time showed complete loyalty to the Kremlin. Putin could not allow this to happen.

On January 5, the President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, requested military assistance from the member states of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which includes Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia. The Kremlin and its allies agreed to send troops, but events unfolded so rapidly that Russia and other CSTO countries' military aid was purely symbolic. By the time Russian troops arrived in Kazakhstan, street unrest had been localized. Officially, 338 people died as a result of the protests in various cities of Kazakhstan, and more than 3,000 were injured.

It is likely that due to the events in Kazakhstan, Putin lost several weeks and was forced to postpone the invasion date of Ukraine.

By January 2022, the Americans were 100% certain that war would start. On January 23, the US State Department allowed some embassy staff in Kyiv to leave Ukraine voluntarily "due to the threat of military action by Russia." Australia, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Canada also announced the partial evacuation of their embassy personnel.

Unlike their Western colleagues, representatives of the Ukrainian authorities somehow demonstrated restrained optimism. On January 25, Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov stated on the ICTV channel that he does not see an immediate threat of a full-scale Russian invasion into Ukraine.

On January 27, a phone call took place between Biden and Zelensky. According to CNN, the talks went "not very well": both presidents diverged in their assessment of the current situation. Biden convinced Zelensky that a Russian invasion was "practically obvious" and urged him to prepare for the "inevitable" assault and "looting" of Kyiv. Zelensky disagreed with such an assessment and asked not to spread panic, as it harms the Ukrainian economy.

On February 4, 2022, the Winter Olympics started in Beijing. Most likely, Putin again decided to postpone the invasion date of Ukraine so as not to upset his dear friend, Chinese leader Xi Jinping.

Undoubtedly, the war would immediately overshadow the Olympics in all world news.

On February 10, US President Joe Biden in an interview with NBC News called on all remaining Americans in Ukraine to leave the country. The next day, February 11, during a video conference with allies from the European Union and NATO, Biden even named the invasion date — February 16.

On February 14, Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced the temporary relocation of the US Embassy in Ukraine from Kyiv to Lviv. Later, The Wall Street Journal reported that the State Department ordered the destruction of all network equipment and computers at the embassy, as well as dismantling the internal telephone system.

And what was Vladimir Zelensky doing during these days? Instead of preparing for defense, evacuating museum valuables from border cities, and evacuating children, the President of Ukraine declared February 16 a new national holiday — Unity Day. Local officials were obliged to hold a solemn raising of the national flag to the sounds of the national anthem at 10 a.m. in their cities.

February 16 arrived. The war did not start. There were still four days left until the end of the Olympics, with the competition for medals in full swing. But each subsequent day indicated that the situation was becoming increasingly threatening. On February 17-18, several shellings by the Ukrainian army were staged in the occupied part of Donbas, supposedly confirming the fact of ceasefire violation. The video recording of "Ukrainian shellings" was purely formal. For example, one of the videos, supposedly shot on February 18 during shelling by the Armed Forces of Ukraine, was created on February 8 — ten days before that. The sound in the clip was partially copied from another video published on YouTube back in 2010.

On the same day, February 18, the occupation authorities of the DPR (Donetsk People's Republic) accused Ukraine of blowing up a car allegedly belonging to the head of the Donetsk police, Denis Sinenkov. But journalists quickly proved the staging. Photos of the aftermath of the explosion showed a burned old model UAZ car with Sinenkov's license plate attached. Although everyone in Donetsk knew that the local police chief drove a new UAZ Patriot around the city.

Finally, on February 21, Russian military propaganda reached its culmination (at the time). Television aired the aftermath of the breakthrough of Ukrainian sabotage groups into Russian territory. After that, due to the threat of an offensive by the Armed Forces of

Ukraine from the occupied part of Donbas, the evacuation of the civilian population to Russia began.

On February 22, Vladimir Putin signed a decree recognizing the independence of the DPR and LPR. Almost immediately, the Russian Federation Council gave the president the right to use Russian troops abroad. That same day, videos appeared showing the official introduction of Russian troops into the territory of the DPR and LPR. Despite these Ukrainian territories being occupied by Russia for 8 years before this, the Kremlin did not acknowledge its involvement in the events in Donbas.

Captured documents and Russian military maps indicate that the invasion was prepared for February 22. However, for unknown reasons, likely related to formal issues in Moscow, the attack was postponed to February 24.

Putin Issues Another Ultimatum, Now to Ukraine

Could Ukraine have avoided war in those days? Recalling the sequence of events, at a press conference on February 22, Vladimir Putin offered Ukraine several conditions for normalizing relations. However, upon closer inspection, these conditions, like the previous ultimatum addressed to the USA and NATO, were purely formal in nature. Given the peculiarity of Ukrainian legislation, they were impossible to fulfill.

For instance, Putin demanded that the Ukrainian authorities recognize the results of the referendum in Crimea and renounce joining NATO.

"The first thing that needs to be done is to recognize the will of the people living in Sevastopol and Crimea. How is this will any worse than what happened in Kosovo? It is not. The decision was made by parliament, here – by a popular referendum," Putin stated.

The demands of the Russian president were not only impossible to fulfill but also deceptive. Firstly, the Crimean referendum was held illegally. At the time of its conduct on March 17, 2014, Ukrainian laws were in effect in Crimea, which clearly prohibited local authorities from initiating and conducting referendums on matters of territorial integrity. Secondly, the referendum was conducted under the full

control of the occupying troops of a neighboring country. And most importantly, the Constitution of Ukraine prohibits any changes to legislation that violate the territorial integrity of the state.

Even if we assume that Zelensky decided to agree to Putin's conditions, he would not have been able to implement these conditions into Ukrainian legislation. The only legal way to fulfill these conditions would have been to adopt a new Constitution of Ukraine, without Crimea as part of the country. But this procedure had to go through two sessions of parliament, even with a constitutional majority ($\frac{2}{3}$ of the deputy composition of the Verkhovna Rada). Considering the character and traditions of Ukrainian society, this could only lead to a new, now third, revolution.

Of course, Putin understood that Zelensky, even if he wished to, could not fulfill his conditions. The basic plan of the Russian president was a complete change of Ukrainian power and the return of President Yanukovych. It is quite possible that Putin already envisioned in his dreams how he would receive a parade on Khreshchatyk after a short victorious war. He was not going to wait half a year for Zelensky to change the Constitution. And will he change it at all? Putin expected that the Ukrainian government would collapse like a house of cards within a few days following the Afghan scenario.

As for Kyiv's response to Putin's ultimatum, the next day, on February 23, Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal stated that Ukraine considers it impossible to fulfill the conditions for normalizing relations according to Vladimir Putin's scenario:

"Fulfilling the conditions stated by the President of Russia to Ukraine contradicts the choice of Ukrainian society. For an independent, sovereign Ukraine and for me, as the Prime Minister of our country, this is impossible," Shmyhal wrote on his Telegram channel.

Why Wasn't Zelensky Preparing for War? The Answer is Simple

If the accusations against Volodymyr Zelensky were limited to corruption, it wouldn't be so bad. Ukrainians had somehow gotten used to it. Then the name of the comedian from Kryvyi Rih would just stand next to Viktor Yanukovych. In terms of the scale of corruption,

they were about on the same level. It's just that under Zelensky, it wasn't so noticeable because during wartime, more than half of all Ukraine's state budget expenses were covered by the USA and other Western countries.

Many are beginning to forget that Yanukovych, after his flight, left Ukraine's treasury empty. As of February 27, 2014, there were only 108,000 hryvnias or \$11,300 left in the single treasury account. Almost everything had been plundered.

Even in December 2013, three months before his flight, Prime Minister Azarov begged Putin for a \$15 billion loan because, at that moment, there was nothing to cover the state budget expenses. True, Putin prudently decided to give the money in tranches, so the Ukrainian government managed to receive only \$3 billion.

Along with Yanukovych (though by different routes), fled to Russia: Ukraine's Prime Minister Mykola Azarov, the head of the National Bank Serhiy Arbuzov, and almost all ministers. Viktor Yanukovych's presidency ended in a complete disaster, both economically and politically.

Undoubtedly, something similar could await Zelensky. Even before the war, it was clear that this team was competent only in one thing: transferring state finances to dubious private companies. But everything changed at the end of February 2022. The war pushed corruption into the background. After the shock caused by the events in Bucha and Mariupol, a logical question arose: why did all this happen? Why wasn't the Ukrainian army prepared for a full-scale invasion by Russia? After all, American intelligence reports that Putin was preparing for war appeared several months before the invasion.

The answer to this question is very simple. To strengthen the country's defense capability, it was necessary to cut capital construction programs and transfer these funds to the army. Zelensky, having already tasted big money, categorically refused to do this. War did not fit into his logic, as undoubtedly, not only Ukraine but also Russia would suffer. Therefore, he thought that Putin would not dare to launch a full-scale invasion, and the situation would somehow calm down.

Famous Ukrainian volunteer Taras Chmut, always cautiously assessing Zelensky, in October 2023 stated that one of the main reasons for the poor preparation for the war was the lack of military personnel.

"We physically lacked people... Increasing the army to 300-350 thousand would have meant increasing the budget, but there was a position from the president that he had a different vision, so it turned out as it did," Chmut said.

Chmut's words are confirmed by an interview Zelensky gave on February 18, 2022, to the news agency RBC-Ukraine. The president stated that Ukraine could not afford to increase the army because then it would have to give up infrastructure projects.

"We can increase the army two or three times, but then, for example, we can't build roads. For us, this is a problem," Zelensky said.

Alright. Until December 2021, Putin's rhetoric could be dismissed as intimidation. But in January, intelligence data clearly indicated that the Russian army was ready for invasion. Even assuming that Putin was bluffing and would back down at the last moment, the President of Ukraine still should have strengthened the state's defense capability.

What was Zelensky doing in January-February 2022? After celebrating the New Year at the state residence Huta in the Carpathians, the president extended his holidays at the private ski resort Bukovel. There, on January 5, in a café, Zelensky and Yermak were photographed at a table with a bottle of alcohol.

As usual, in Bukovel, the president stayed in the same hotel as Ihor Kolomoisky, with their rooms even located on the same floor. Zelensky's team once again called it a coincidence.

After the photo in the café with a bottle of vodka, the president spent several more days skiing, happily posing with tourists. Only on January 8 did he return to Kyiv.

On January 19, 2022, Zelensky made his most scandalous statement about "barbecues," which would later be frequently recalled. He assured Ukrainians that there would be no war, life would continue as usual. "In May, as always – sun, weekends, barbecues... in summer – vacation". The president advised citizens not to stock up on food and matches, explaining news of Russia's preparation for war by claiming that Ukraine's enemies wanted Ukrainians to have a constant sense of anxiety.

That same day, January 19, one of Zelensky's closest associates, head of the parliamentary faction "Servant of the People" David

Arakhamia in an interview with the magazine "Focus" stated that "Western media are spreading fakes," and overall the situation is no worse than it was in the spring of 2021, when Russia also supposedly threatened war.

"Remember the escalation last spring? The situation as of today is no worse than that, roughly in the same range. Why are Western media escalating? Hard to say," Arakhamia stated.

On January 23, the US State Department announced that some American diplomatic workers would be evacuated from Kyiv and urged US citizens to leave Ukraine as soon as possible.

On January 25, in his next video address, Volodymyr Zelensky reassured fellow citizens that the "situation is under control" and called on them "not to believe fakes." That same day, he held a meeting with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, where he publicly disagreed with the US forecasts and hinted that Ukrainian intelligence knows the situation better.

"I think we have generally the same agenda, but we still want to discuss some things in detail because you are far abroad, and we are here, and I think we know some things a bit deeper about our state," Zelensky stated.

On January 31, Minister of Defense Oleksiy Reznikov assured that there is no reason for panic because the situation is identical to last year's maneuvers of Russian troops at the borders of Ukraine.

"In April 2021, the combat component that Russia had amounted to 126,000 people. The number then and now is proportional. Disproportionate reaction... Then, the bold behavior of the Kremlin led to them receiving a call from the new President of the United States, Mr. Biden, and then a meeting in Geneva... Russia understood that this tactic works. And in the fall, it resorted to it again," Reznikov said.

On February 11, the German news magazine Der Spiegel, citing sources in the German federal government, named the probable date of Russia's attack on Ukraine — February 16. This information was provided to German officials by the CIA.

Commenting on this forecast, Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine Oleksiy Danilov assured that the American intelligence data was incorrect: "As of today, we do not see that a large-scale offensive by the Russian Federation can start on the

16th or 17th."

February 15. Minister of Foreign Affairs Dmytro Kuleba stated that everything is under control: "The security situation remains tense but is fully under control. Ukraine is ready for any developments."

Several months after the war began, when Ukrainian society began to ask more frequently who was to blame for the Russians being able to capture vast territories in a matter of days, Zelensky finally announced the official version. According to him, he deliberately did not inform about the threat of invasion for two reasons: to avoid provoking massive panic and to avoid damaging the Ukrainian economy.

"...If we had reported it – as some people, whom I will not name, wanted – then I would have lost \$7 billion a month, starting from last October, and at the moment when the Russians actually attacked, they would have captured us in three days," Zelensky said in an interview with The Washington Post in August 2022.

At first glance, the explanation of the President of Ukraine has a certain logic. He feared that millions of Ukrainian citizens, learning about the inevitability of war, would mass flee abroad, and enterprises would lose workers. Of course, one can question the moral aspect of this decision. On one scale, the loss of \$7 billion for the economy, on the other — tens of thousands of people who died in Mariupol and other front-line cities due to the lack of evacuation. But Zelensky has yet to explain why, over four months, starting in October, as the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, he failed to organize proper defense of the directions warned about by American intelligence.

Why weren't museum valuables transported to safe regions? Why weren't children from orphanages evacuated? Zelensky had enough time for all this. Instead of protecting his citizens, the President of Ukraine was vacationing at a ski resort and posing with tourists.

Person Number 2

On January 18, 2022, about a month before the invasion, an anonymous Telegram channel "Pechersky Hill," close to the former Speaker of Parliament Dmytro Razumkov, shared insider information. Allegedly, Yermak convinced Zelensky and his entire team that there would be no war. Therefore, Ukraine was not prepared for the

invasion. Here is the text of that Telegram post:

"By the way, do you know what the Office of the President of Ukraine thinks about the possibility of a full-scale Russian invasion? The answer is – they don't think about it at all. They are firmly convinced that there will be no invasion.

This explains why officials from the OP and Zelensky himself have not yet rushed to evacuate their families from the country and why the OP reacts with indifferent nonchalance to news like the Armed Forces of Ukraine being supplied with fuel for only 30%. Internal problems of the President's Office are now of more concern than external threats.

The source of such exemplary optimism was the head of the President's Office, Andriy Yermak. He convinced his entire team that he had long settled everything with the Russians, that Ukraine is not threatened by anything, and all movements of Russian troops are exclusively a nerve game with Europe. It's to make gas prices jump on European exchanges due to the threat of war and to make uncooperative Europe agree to the launch of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. Which, of course, will not be launched, because Yermak has already negotiated there too.

Yermak's optimism managed to infect his surroundings to such an extent that messages are consistently sent to the "Servant of the People" faction in the Verkhovna Rada and to party centers in local areas: "Don't panic. Everything is under control. There is no reason to worry".

We have no idea how to comment on all this. The question arises, what does Zelensky do if it turns out that the head of his office... was mistaken? To put it mildly..."

Naturally, Yermak's actions can be attributed to incompetence, considering that this trait is typical for people from Zelensky's team. Especially since Yermak himself said that he "did not believe until the last" in the possibility of Russian invasion.

However, one should not forget that Zelensky received accurate information about the planned attack at least two days before the start of the war. Not to mention the American intelligence data starting from October-November.

Are two days a lot or a little? It is enough to blow up bridges on the border with Crimea and relocate some troops to the border with Belarus. Nevertheless, the President's Office, represented by Yermak and Zelensky, even in those last days, prohibited any actions that could significantly increase the country's defense capability. In August

2022, advisor to the head of the President's Office Mykhailo Podoliak explained this by saying they "were psychologically not ready to blow up bridges".

"That morning of February 24, we were psychologically not ready to blow up bridges. The first few hours we thought: we invested in comfort for people, how now to destroy all this? We thought that on the other side there were also people who would treat homes, bridges, and other infrastructure carefully," Podoliak said.

Notice: Podoliak deliberately manipulates the date. It's not just about the morning of February 24. Both Yermak and Zelensky already knew on February 22 that the war would start in two days. What role did Andriy Yermak play in Ukraine not being prepared for the invasion? Without any doubt, his role was key, as the head of the President's Office had a significant influence on the incompetent Zelensky.

So who is Andriy Yermak, and why do many in Ukraine accuse him of treason, not just ordinary mistakes?

Andriy Yermak was born in 1971 in Kyiv. His mother is Russian from Saint Petersburg. His father worked at the Soviet embassy in Afghanistan in the 80s. Because of this, some Ukrainian journalists hinted at his father's connection with the KGB. But Andriy Yermak categorically denies this. According to him, his father was a technical specialist in Afghanistan and had no relation to the Soviet special service.

In 1995, after graduating from the law faculty of the Institute of International Relations of Kyiv University, Andriy Yermak began working as a lawyer. Two years later, he founded his own law firm, which specialized in intellectual property protection. According to Yermak, his clients included representatives of Disney, Pixar, and Universal.

It should be noted that protecting copyright is not the most profitable business in Ukraine. Andriy Yermak apparently made his first big money by lobbying the interests of small business owners in Kyiv. Until 2006, about 3,500 small trade objects operated in the capital. Opening a trade kiosk of 4-6 square meters cost no more than \$10,000 at that time. Each kiosk provided at least \$500 of net profit every month.

After Leonid Chernovetsky was elected mayor of Kyiv, his team significantly expanded the issuance of permits for opening trade

kiosks. Over five years, their number grew threefold: to 12,000. Most of those who received such permission did not even engage in business themselves: they leased kiosks to other entrepreneurs.

In 2010, power in the Kyiv mayor's office changed. Instead of Chernovetsky, who fled abroad, Oleksandr Popov from Yanukovych's team became the acting city head. In 2011, the new mayor decided to change the rules for kiosks. Now their owners were required to pay for the use of the capital's land.

Entrepreneurs did not like the change in rules. They began to hold protest actions and united into a public organization called the "Association of Small Business Owners and Small Architectural Forms". It was headed by lawyer Andriy Yermak.

The new organization began to protect the interests of the capital's entrepreneurs. For example, it challenged the Kyiv City Council's decision to ban the sale of alcohol and cigarettes in kiosks. For legal support, each kiosk owner paid Yermak monthly contributions.

In 2013, the future head of the President's Office worked for some time as the manager of the elite clothing store "Sanahunt". Yermak insists he only provided business consultations to the store owner and was not on the payroll of this company.

From there, Andriy Yermak's career sharply took off. He became a film producer, participating in the creation of three quite successful films: "Squat 32", "The Fight Rules", and "The Line". Since 2016, Yermak's production company Garnet International Media Group received more than 53 million hryvnias (approximately \$2 million) from the state for the production and promotion of films.

Yermak met Zelensky in 2010 when the comedian unexpectedly became the general producer of the "Inter" TV channel. It is known that for many years they regularly communicated and maintained friendly relations. There is even a photo taken in 2016 at a restaurant in the French city of Cannes, where Yermak dines at a table with Volodymyr and Olena Zelensky.

Before his appointment as head of the president's office, Andriy Yermak was practically unknown to the general public: there were more colorful characters around Zelensky then. Journalists then liked to discuss Andriy Bohdan — the former lawyer of Kolosovsky, who became the head of the President's Office in June 2019.

Unlike Zelensky, who only jokes well according to a pre-written

script, Bohdan was a real fountain of humor. He hardly resembled a lawyer and even less an influential politician. Bohdan had such a characteristic appearance for a comedic artist that even against the background of Zelensky, he gave the impression of someone who accidentally got into politics.

Zelensky and Bohdan worked together for only half a year. By the fall of 2019, the press received information that a large part of Bohdan's duties was performed by his deputy Andriy Yermak. It is not known for certain what caused Zelensky to become uncomfortable working with the lawyer of his favorite oligarch, but in February 2020, Bohdan was forced to submit his resignation. Yermak became the head of the President's Office.

The Secret Meeting in Oman

The first suspicions that Andriy Yermak had unofficial communication channels with the Kremlin emerged in early January 2020, when Zelensky made a very strange trip to Oman. Facts suggest that in this Middle Eastern country, the President of Ukraine met with a high-ranking representative of Putin, most likely the Secretary of the Russian Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev.

The chronology of this journey is quite convoluted, but social media and modern technologies significantly simplified the work of journalists. According to the official version, Zelensky celebrated the New Year with his family at the state residence Sinegora in the Carpathians. However, on January 1, he was spotted several tens of kilometers away, at the Bukovel ski resort. Kolomoisky was also in Bukovel at the time, but that's beside the point.

Zelensky spent several days skiing and taking photos with tourists. It seemed that after an extended winter holiday, he would return to Kyiv on January 8. Suddenly, on the morning of January 5, the president was photographed in the capital of the Middle Eastern state of Oman, at the premises of the five-star Al Bustan Palace Ritz-Carlton Hotel. It turned out later, it was a private visit, allegedly funded by Zelensky's wife. Though initially, the President's Office claimed that the head of state flew to Oman to discuss trade and economic cooperation between the two countries, strengthen diplomatic relations, and attract investments.

According to journalists from Radio Free Europe, on January 7, a

business jet with the registration T7-GEM flew to Oman. This aircraft belonged to Viktor Medvedchuk: Putin's unofficial representative in Ukraine. A few hours later, a Bombardier business jet with the registration 9H-VJN flew into the capital's airport of Oman, Muscat, from Moscow. An important detail: this aircraft had no orders for several days and had been in Stockholm since January 4. On January 7, the plane flew to Moscow, picked someone up, and flew out to Oman 2 hours later.

On the morning of January 8, in Tehran, Iranian air defenses mistakenly shot down a passenger plane of the Ukraine International Airlines. The crew and all passengers, mostly Iranian citizens flying through Kyiv to Toronto, died. It would seem that after such a catastrophe, the president should urgently return to Kyiv. But Zelensky does not rush back to Ukraine. He spends the entire day in Oman and returns to Kyiv on the night of January 9, 19 hours after the aviation disaster with the Ukrainian plane.

What follows is most intriguing. Evidently, on January 8, negotiations between Zelensky and the mysterious delegation from Moscow took place, after which the business jet from Kyiv, belonging to Medvedchuk, picks up unknown passengers and flies to Moscow. The aircraft with the registration 9H-VJN, which came from Moscow, takes Zelensky and Yermak to Kyiv.

Journalists from the Ukrainian edition of Radio Free Europe claim that Nikolai Patrushev flew in to negotiate with Zelensky and Yermak. However, they provided no evidence for this. It seems that indeed, unofficial negotiations between Russia and Ukraine took place in Oman. Apparently, they ended without results, as subsequent events indicated a lack of breakthrough in relations between the two countries.

The Theory of Yermak's Betrayal

Among Ukrainian bloggers, a conspiratorial theory has long been circulating that Andriy Yermak is a Russian intelligence agent with the codename "Kozyr" (Trump Card). However, none of them have been able to present any evidence to support this theory. Nevertheless, observing Yermak's political activities, it's impossible not to notice his decidedly favorable attitude towards Russia, at least until the war.

For instance, in September 2019, Andriy Yermak, in a conversation

with the U.S. Chargé d'Affaires in Ukraine William Taylor and former U.S. Special Representative for Ukraine Kurt Volker, directly accused former President Poroshenko of the war in Donbas. He did so with such emotion that none of the participants doubted Yermak's sincere belief in his accusations.

During the meeting with Yermak, Volker hinted at dropping the idea of prosecuting Poroshenko. In response, Yermak pulled out a mobile phone, showed a photo of his brother wounded in Donbas, and declared Poroshenko to be the culprit. As William Taylor recalls, he was convinced of Yermak's deep-seated emotional resentment towards Poroshenko.

Blaming the former president for the war in Donbas is peculiar, given that Petro Poroshenko took office in June 2014, while active combat operations in the East began in April. Essentially, Andriy Yermak was echoing Russian propaganda, which also blamed not Putin but Ukrainian politicians for the conflict. And according to Taylor, Yermak genuinely believed in these accusations.

Interestingly, the heroic brother of the President's Office head, Denis Yermak, was accused by journalists and opposition deputy Geo Leros in March 2020 of organizing a scheme for trading state positions. His conversations discussing the cost of various leadership positions with candidates were recorded on video. Ukrainian law enforcement showed no interest in these recordings, and Denis Yermak faced no consequences for his actions.

Another piece of the puzzle adding to Andriy Yermak's portrait is the "Wagner case" or Wagnergate. Facts indicate that he was the one who disrupted this operation by insisting on its postponement for a week. As a result, the plan of Ukrainian special services was thwarted, and Russian mercenaries avoided arrest in Ukraine.

Briefly, the "Wagner case" involved the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine (GUR) and the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) planning to arrest 33 members of the Wagner group in the summer of 2020. This included those involved in the downing of a military IL-76 near Luhansk in June 2014 and potentially important witnesses in the MH17 flight downing case.

Russian mercenaries were to be arrested in Kyiv with the help of a forced, supposedly emergency landing of a Turkish Airlines plane traveling from Minsk to Istanbul. Months before, Ukrainian intelligence agents had placed fake job ads in Russia for security work

in Venezuela, promising salaries of several thousand dollars a month, with a preference for candidates with combat experience. This way, among the hundreds of Russian applicants, GUR and SBU agents managed to identify those of most interest: members of the Wagner group.

Zelensky was informed about the upcoming special operation on June 15, 2020. He approved the operation and asked for a plan to be prepared, which was reviewed and approved by the Minister of Defense on July 1, 2020. Subsequently, two senior officers responsible for the operation, Vasyl Burba, head of GUR, and Ruslan Baranetskyi, deputy chairman of the SBU, regularly reported to Zelensky. However, on July 23, 2020, during the final plan approval at the President's Office, Andriy Yermak insisted on postponing the operation date from July 25 by another week.

It's worth noting that on July 25, the bus with Wagner mercenaries crossed the border between Russia and Belarus. According to the original plan, they were to fly to Istanbul and then to Caracas that same day. Instead, the mercenaries were accommodated in one of the resorts near Minsk. The new flight date was set for July 30.

On the morning of the penultimate day of the Wagner mercenaries' stay in the resort, Belarusian special forces stormed in. The mercenaries were detained allegedly for planning riots in Minsk but were later returned to Russia.

The reason for the operation's failure turned out to be a phone call from Zelensky to Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko. Zelensky himself only admitted this after many months of denial. In October 2021, during a briefing in Truskavets, the Ukrainian president revealed he had informed Lukashenko about the Wagner mercenaries near Minsk, to which Lukashenko responded, "We will do everything possible."

Initially, the President's Office claimed that there was no operation to detain the Wagner mercenaries at all. Then a new version emerged: the operation was prepared but by foreign intelligence services that wanted to involve Ukraine in unnecessary troubles. Only after the testimony of the head of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defense, Vasyl Burba, who publicly disclosed some details of the failed plan to detain Russian mercenaries, was the president forced to acknowledge the truth. Burba, who called for a parliamentary investigative commission on the fact of treason, was immediately dismissed from his position. His service apartment and

state security were also taken away, although, after public outcry, the security detail was returned.

Why did Zelensky sabotage the special operation of Ukrainian intelligence services? According to him, he did not want to worsen relations with Russia ahead of negotiations with Putin. Of course, as the Supreme Commander-in-Chief and elected head of state, the president has the right to make such political decisions. But one can be 100% certain that without Yermak's advice, this would not have happened.

Andriy Yermak does not need to be an FSB agent to push Zelensky towards actions beneficial to Russia. Currently, we do not know whether he truly works for the Kremlin or simply holds pro-Russian views, which he has carefully hidden under the guise of patriotism since the start of the full-scale war.

And So the War Began...

The further we get from the day of the full-scale invasion, the more Zelensky and his allies try to mythologize the events of those days in a favorable light for themselves. However, facts indicate that the war was not a surprise for the president. As early as January 18, CIA Director William Burns detailed Putin's plan during his visit to Kyiv. On January 27, 2022, in a phone call, Biden again warned Zelensky that war "was almost certain as soon as the ground froze over later in February." Although the Ukrainian president tried to deny this forecast, citing his own data, he was well aware of all the necessary information and the full extent of the risk.

Even accounting for Zelensky's naivety and incompetence, he knew from at least February 22 about the inevitability of the attack. On that day, Ukrainian intelligence learned that Russian military at the border with Ukraine began receiving combat orders. Nonetheless, Zelensky still pretends that the onset of war was a shock to him.

To put it mildly, that's not quite true. It can only be agreed that the president was not prepared for war. He consciously and voluntarily sabotaged the execution of a set of actions that could have minimized the consequences of the Russian invasion. Here, it would be apt to quote item 20 of Article 106 of the Constitution of Ukraine:

"The President decides, in accordance with the law, on the total or partial mobilization and the imposition of martial law in Ukraine or in

its particular localities in case of a THREAT OF AGGRESSION, danger to the state independence of Ukraine."

One does not need to be a major analyst or expert to understand the fatal mistake made by President Zelensky. By neglecting the security of his citizens, he doomed hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians to occupation, and tens of thousands of civilians died.

Representatives of Zelensky's team have repeatedly noted the "fearlessness" of the president. Apparently hinting that after the start of the war, he refused the Americans' offer to evacuate him to a safe region, to Lviv or another locality in Western Ukraine. This information did indeed appear on The Washington Post website on February 25, citing American officials and Congress members.

"U.S. government officials spoke with Zelensky about security issues, particularly about the safest places for the president to ensure the continuity of state leadership," said an unnamed White House representative.

However, several months later, The Washington Post, which initially reported the evacuation offer, added important details to this narrative. In an article dated September 24, 2022, Paul Sonne and Isabelle Khurshudyan wrote that Zelensky expressed willingness to resign or LEAVE KYIV if it would help end the war:

"In the first hours of the war, when Western officials urged him to evacuate, Zelensky told them he would gladly leave or resign if it would end the war."

These words can be interpreted in various ways. But it's worth noting that Volodymyr Zelensky now carefully avoids any mention of the fact that he indeed considered the possibility of fleeing Kyiv and leaving his post.

Insiders from the President's Office claim that in the first days of the war, Zelensky simply did not know what to do, and some people in his circle seriously considered the possibility of reconciliation with Putin, even at the cost of territorial concessions. However, he did not pursue this due to two reasons: the flight of the head of state could have returned the country to a state similar to February 2014, in other words, Zelensky's departure could be interpreted by the opposition as treason. There was a risk that Poroshenko would take control of the parliament and become the acting president. Another reason was that the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, General Zaluzhny, explained to Zelensky that the situation was not hopeless.

What was happening in Ukraine at the moment of invasion? Let me provide just a few facts:

On the border with Belarus, there were practically no Ukrainian troops, only border guards. Russians easily entered Ukrainian territory through the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone and started advancing towards Kyiv. The 72nd brigade of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which was supposed to protect the capital, was redeployed towards Irpin only on February 23.

Days before the war began, almost all units of the National Guard were withdrawn from the Gostomel airfield. The airfield, which, according to U.S. intelligence, was one of the main targets for the Russians, was left with only 150 soldiers for protection.

Kyiv's Zhulyany airport had no military protection at all: neither police nor National Guard. To protect against a possible assault, General Serhiy Krivonos ordered the airport's runway to be doused with machine oil.

A week before the invasion, Zaluzhny received orders to redeploy the 92nd Brigade of the Armed Forces from the Kharkiv direction to Donbass. The Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces did not follow this presidential directive and kept the military near Kharkiv, thereby saving Ukraine's second-largest city from occupation.

Interestingly, on January 20, 2022, a month before the war, Volodymyr Zelensky in an interview with The Washington Post suggested that "Kharkiv could be occupied." These words caused such a large resonance in Ukraine that even the president's loyal mayor of Kharkiv, Ihor Terekhov, expressed his outrage.

Almost all the Western weapons: portable Javelin, NLAW, and Stinger missile systems, provided by the UK and the USA, were in storage at the Yavoriv military range near the Polish border at the time of the invasion. The armed forces were given only a few units.

The Russians' plan on the Kyiv direction was relatively easy to read. The Kremlin had so overestimated its forces that it hoped to replicate the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia. Russian special forces were supposed to quickly capture the Gostomel and Vasylkiv airfields, after which these airfields were to continuously receive military transport planes with thousands of paratroopers. Kyiv was intended to be blocked from three sides: north, west, and east. Kremlin strategists hoped that Ukrainian forces would not resist.

This plan was partially successful. Russian forces did indeed almost reach Kyiv. In the east, they entrenched themselves in villages near the satellite city of Brovary, but did not enter the city. In the north, they entered the satellite city of Bucha (15 km from Kyiv), but in the neighboring Irpin, they could not establish control. Russians crossed the Zhytomyr highway leading from Kyiv to the west several times. But further south, towards Boyarka and Vasylkiv, they could not proceed. On the night of February 26, near the Vasylkiv military airport, Russians landed paratroopers from parachutes. The battle lasted all night, but the occupiers failed to capture the airfield. That same night, a Ukrainian Su-27 shot down a Russian military transport plane IL-76 with several dozen paratroopers on board.

As for the Gostomel airport, which served as a base for the world's largest transport aircraft "Mriya" and other planes produced by the Antonov plant in peacetime, the battle for it began on February 24. That day, 34 Russian Ka-52 and Mi-8 helicopters landed approximately 300 paratroopers on its territory. During the flight across the Kyiv Reservoir, several helicopters were shot down, but this did not prevent the Russians from capturing the airfield.

In the evening of February 24, Ukrainian military recaptured the airport, but the Russians captured it again, this time with the help of ground forces. Time passed, but Gostomel did not start receiving military transport planes with the Russian paratroopers, as the Ukrainian Armed Forces damaged its runway with artillery fire. In the battle for the airport, the AN-225 "Mriya" aircraft was destroyed. According to the official Ukrainian version, the Russians are to blame.

Experts believe that the failure to capture the airfields in Gostomel and Vasylkiv was a severe blow to the Russian military leadership, as they apparently had no backup plan for capturing Kyiv.

Almost everywhere, Russians encountered fierce resistance from Ukrainian troops. On February 25, the situation was exacerbated by the blowing up of a dam on the Irpin River. Water from the Kyiv Reservoir turned the small river into a large natural barrier over the following weeks. As a result, the Russians could not enter Kyiv and Vyshhorod from the north. From the west, along the Zhytomyr highway, the road to the capital was also closed: near the village of Stoyanka, Ukrainians blew up a bridge.

Unable to break through the defense near Irpin, in early March, Russian occupying forces decided to focus on advancing to Kyiv through the village of Moschun, located to the northwest, halfway

between Irpin and Vyshhorod. The Battle of Moschun became one of the bloodiest in the early stage of the war, with dozens of soldiers dying on both sides. The Ukrainian Armed Forces held their positions, and on March 16, they drove the Russians out of the village. A few days later, Ukrainian units, with the support of heavy artillery, pushed the Russian forces back to the Irpin River.

The Battle of Kyiv ended in defeat for the Russians. Putin realized that his plan had failed, and capturing Kyiv would not be possible. The Kremlin was not prepared for a real war: the calculation was only that the Armed Forces of Ukraine would not last even a few days, Zelensky would flee the capital, and the Russian army would triumphantly hold a victory parade on Khreshchatyk. Without a backup plan, on March 29, the Russian General Staff began withdrawing troops from under Kyiv to reinforce their positions in the East and South of Ukraine. In these directions, the occupiers were lucky. They managed to capture vast territories, which they now had to hold at any cost.

The Bucha Massacre, Changing the Character of the War

The killing of more than 1,000 civilians in the Kyiv region by Russian soldiers, about 500 of whom lived in the small town of Bucha, shocked the entire world. A distinctive feature of this massacre was that the killings did not occur instantaneously. Russian military personnel killed peaceful Ukrainians over several weeks in March 2022. Most victims were shot, dozens were tortured before death, and there were cases of rape.

To this day, there is no unanimous opinion on the reasons for this violence and what the position of Russian commanders was regarding the actions of their subordinates. Only one thing is known: the officers not only did not prevent the unmotivated violence against the civilians of Bucha but also committed murders themselves.

Russian propaganda and the Kremlin's policy on the Ukrainian issue have one feature. It suggests that the Russian-speaking population of Donbas are ethnic Russians, while the Ukrainian-speaking population is supposedly hostile to Russia. Obviously, this influenced the motivation of Russian military actions against the locals. Moreover, the occupiers were embittered by the fact that a few days before the occupation of Bucha, Ukrainian forces decimated

several Russian military columns. One was burned at the approaches to Irpin, another in Bucha itself, on Vokzalna Street. The version that the killings in Bucha were ordered to suppress any resistance from the local population, regardless of civilian casualties, should not be excluded.

Mass killings of men, women, and children in the Kyiv region can be divided into several groups:

1. Random shootings of civilians who were driving or walking within sight of Russian military personnel. This group includes not only those killed on the streets of Bucha but also those trying to evacuate to safe areas. Dozens of motorists, most of whom were killed on the Zhytomyr highway, fell victim to these crimes. They were trying to leave Kyiv towards Western Ukraine but did not know that Russian troops were stationed along the M-03 highway. At least ten civilians were shot dead near the Warsaw highway close to Vorzel. The Russians were aware that they were committing crimes: after the killings, they burned the cars and bodies to hide evidence of the murders.
1. Unmotivated killings of civilians. This category includes cases where Russian military personnel killed men, women, and even teenagers during house searches or when trying to leave their homes. There are numerous eyewitness accounts of Bucha residents being killed simply for going out for food or firewood. Some were killed by snipers, who entertained themselves or honed their skills in this way.
1. Killings of civilians, predominantly men, on suspicion of pro-Ukrainian sentiments. Already on March 4, almost immediately after the occupation of Bucha began, Russian military personnel started searching for citizens based on pre-prepared lists. They checked every house and conducted filtration, looking for former Ukrainian army servicemen and civilians who supported the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Those found were executed, many victims were tortured before being killed. The Russians killed anyone they found suspicious. For example, Bucha resident Pavlo Vlasenko was detained because he wore military-style

trousers belonging to his son, a keeper. When Vlasenko's body was later found, it bore signs of burns. On March 12, another Bucha resident, Ilya Navalny, was shot in the head. He was not affiliated with the Ukrainian military or local political activists. The Russians simply disliked his surname because it was the same as that of Putin's longtime foe Alexei Navalny.

1. Killings committed during looting or after rapes. At least two women were known to have been killed after being raped by Russian soldiers in Bucha. In total, according to the Ukrainian prosecutor's office, by the end of 2022, 62 cases of rape committed by the occupiers were recorded.

On August 8, 2022, the official Ukrainian authorities published the number of civilians killed in the city of Bucha: 458 bodies (419 with signs of shooting, torture, or violent injuries) and 39 bodies, likely to have died during the occupation from natural causes. Among them, 366 were men, 86 women. The gender of five victims was unidentifiable due to the poor condition of the body remains. Nine were children. Fifty bodies remain unidentified along with body parts and ashes.

Besides Bucha, killings of civilians during the occupation were recorded in other settlements of the Kyiv region. For instance, in the small town of Borodyanka, 162 residents died during the occupation (48 of whom were found under the rubble of buildings bombed by Russian aviation) and 28 went missing. Among those killed in Borodyanka were many young men, shot in the head.

The Russian authorities' reaction to the disclosure of information about mass killings in Bucha was predictably cynical. On April 3, 2022, the Russian Ministry of Defense declared that during the time Bucha was under the control of the Armed Forces of Russia, not a single local resident suffered from any violent actions.

After some time, as photographs of corpses on the streets of Bucha quickly spread across world media sites, the Kremlin was forced to present a new version of events. On April 12, Vladimir Putin claimed that all images and videos of the alleged dead in Bucha are fake, "a setup by the West." Concurrently, pro-Kremlin media concocted another version: the newspaper "Komsomolskaya Pravda" wrote that the killings of civilians in Bucha did occur, but they were committed

by Ukrainian nationalists, after Russian troops left the city.

It's probably unnecessary to say that this stream of nonsense was completely refuted in the course of several independent investigations, including those by journalists from The New York Times and CNN.

The mass killings in Bucha and other towns and villages in the Kyiv region showed Ukrainian society and government representatives that this war aims to exterminate the Ukrainian nation. Without any doubt, a Bucha on a thousand times larger scale awaited Kyiv in case of occupation. Fortunately, thanks to the heroism of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the residents of the capital avoided this.

What Really Happened in the South

On February 23, 2022, the day before the invasion into the Kherson region, Russians at their checkpoints suddenly stopped letting people into Crimea and back without any explanation. Earlier, Ukrainian marines noticed that the enemy was demining the territory they controlled in front of their checkpoint.

That same day, February 23, the command of Ukrainian troops in the Kherson region received information that the enemy might provoke an incident: they themselves would shell the "Titan" chemical plant located on the territory they controlled, to blame Ukraine for it. This case could be used as an analog of the Gleiwitz incident in 1939, when Hitler found a pretext to start a war against Poland.

On February 24, around 4 a.m., Ukrainian military personnel recorded more than thirty military aircraft taking off in Crimea. At first, they circled over the peninsula, obviously forming a battle order. After that, the planes dispersed over the Azov and Black Seas and began a massive missile launch.

The first missile strike hit the locations of Ukrainian units, command points, launch positions, and air defense control points, including the Melitopol airport. Almost all military objects in the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions were targeted. At 4:30 a.m., Russian occupiers shelled Chernobaevka Airport in Kherson with "Kalibr" missiles. But by that time, Ukrainian helicopters had already been relocated elsewhere.

Around the same time, Ukrainian command received information from the commander of the 137th battalion, Colonel Rymarenko. He

reported that the Russians began an artillery barrage, shelling the forward positions of the Ukrainian Armed Forces at the Kalanchak and Chongar checkpoints.

The failure of the defense in the south of Ukraine had catastrophic consequences. Despite the fact that the small number of Ukrainian troops on the border with Crimea resisted fiercely, the Russians managed to break through the defense without much effort, enter the operational space, and by 10 a.m., reach the city of Nova Kakhovka. There, they captured the dam of the Kakhovka HPP and the system of facilities of the North Crimean Canal, through which water from the Dnieper is supplied to Crimea.

That same day, February 24, Russian troops reached Kherson. Approximately at 11 a.m., the Russian airborne troops, having landed from helicopters, took positions near the Antonivskiy Bridge. They failed to secure their positions, as they did not control the western part of the bridge in Kherson, and from the east, Ukrainian units were breaking through to the bridge, not wanting to be surrounded on the left bank of the Dnieper.

Around 8 p.m., on February 24, a tank group of the Ukrainian Armed Forces destroyed Russian paratroopers near the Antonivskiy Bridge and took a defensive position. After that, a column of Ukrainian troops almost an hour crossed the bridge from the left to the right bank of the Dnieper.

At midnight from February 24 to February 25, the Russians conducted an air raid on the positions of the Ukrainian Armed Forces near the Antonivskiy Bridge, after which they began an assault. The Ukrainians retreated into Kherson.

In the morning of February 25, information appeared that the Russian army had crossed the Dnieper through the dam in Nova Kakhovka and was moving towards Kherson by land from the northeast, in the rear of the Ukrainian defense. The Ukrainian Armed Forces had to retreat to Chernobaevka, and then towards Mykolaiv.

The occupiers did not rush to enter Kherson, preferring to encircle the city and advance towards Mykolaiv. The regional center was completely captured on March 1. There was no organized defense of Kherson, except for a spontaneous battle by volunteers in Buzkovy Park, on Naftovykiv Street. A small group of several dozen local men, who had joined the territorial defense a few days earlier, tried to stop the Russian column. Since they had only light weapons (rifles, a few assault rifles, and Molotov cocktails), this attempt was doomed. About

30 territorial defense fighters died in the park that day.

It should be noted that on February 24-25, Ukrainian troops quite successfully carried out airstrikes on columns of Russian troops in the Kherson region. Videos published online show more than ten units of military equipment with the letter Z destroyed on the road between the villages of Radensk and Oleshky. Another column was destroyed near the village of Veliki Kopani. There was also a battle on one of the streets of the town of Oleshky.

The strategic plan of the Russians was to quickly advance to the border with Moldova. Then the Ukrainian troops in the Odesa region would be cut off from the main forces in the center of the country. If this had happened, Ukraine would have lost all of its Black Sea coast. The rapid advance of Russian troops faltered near Mykolaiv — the next regional center after Kherson.

As recalled by General of the Ukrainian Armed Forces Dmytro Marchenko, when he urgently arrived in Mykolaiv on February 25, the city was engulfed in panic. On one of the streets in the city center, he even saw a man removing the blue and yellow Ukrainian flag from a house. When Marchenko, stepping out of the car, asked why he was doing this, the man replied: "They've already taken Kherson, they will be here tomorrow!"

The occupiers advanced with two groups. About 2000 units of equipment, including tanks and armored vehicles, moved from Kherson towards Mykolaiv. The second group: another 1200–1300 units of equipment, began a detour to the north towards Moldova.

The chaos that reigned in the first days of the war is best illustrated by a meeting of the military in Mykolaiv. When Marchenko, who was sent from Kyiv to organize the city's defense, asked one of the commanders about his combat task, he replied: "Circular defense of my military unit." Shocked, the general asked again: "And who will defend the city?"

Mykolaiv was saved from occupation by a miracle. Marchenko managed to quickly build fortifications on the outskirts with the help of excavators gathered from all over the city. About 70 kilometers from Mykolaiv, near the town of Voznesensk, fighters of the 80th Separate Airborne Assault Brigade of the Ukrainian Armed Forces blew up a bridge over the Mervovod River. This stopped the further advance of mechanized columns of the enemy and did not allow them to capture the South Ukrainian Nuclear Power Plant. They also failed to secure positions near Voznesensk.

The maximum achievement of the Russians in this direction was a landing at the Mykolaiv airport. But Ukrainian troops managed to drive the occupiers out of the airport. Failing to fulfill the order to encircle Mykolaiv and reach the border with Moldova, the occupiers returned to the Kherson region.

On the other side of the south of Ukraine, in the direction of Berdyansk and Mariupol, events unfolded more dramatically. After brief battles on the border with Crimea, the Russians broke through the defense of the Ukrainian Armed Forces and within a few hours reached the outskirts of Melitopol. Notably, at the time the war began, there were no Ukrainian troops from Crimea to Melitopol. A small garrison was in the city itself, which managed to delay the Russians for a short time. There was not a single brigade that could cover Mariupol from the side of Crimea, near Melitopol or Berdyansk.

On February 26, the remnants of the Ukrainian troops retreated from Melitopol to the north, to Vasylivka, and then to the village of Kamianske in the Zaporizhzhia region, where they managed to secure positions and prevent the enemy from advancing further north, to Zaporizhzhia. The capture of Melitopol, which occurred on February 25, meant that the 500-thousand-strong Mariupol was doomed to be encircled.

Why couldn't the Ukrainian army stop the enemy in the south? About a year after the war began, Ukrainian society actively discussed the conspiracy theory that the border with Crimea had been demined in advance. And this was supposedly done according to secret agreements reached in Oman between Zelensky and Patrushev, so that the Russians could easily occupy the so-called land corridor between Russia and Crimea. Some instead of Zelensky put Yermak in the place of the main traitor, but the essence did not change much.

In 2023, when journalists began to actively research this topic, the version about demining disappeared. Minefields on the border with Crimea indeed existed, but this did not mean that the entire border was covered with them. The main part of the Russian troops burst into the Kherson region along paved roads that connect the Crimean peninsula with mainland Ukraine.

As for the Ukrainian military, in their opinion, the main problem of the defense of the south was the lack of personnel. According to Major General Andriy Sokolov, who was responsible for the southern direction in February 2022, at the time of the invasion, the Russians had a 20 to 1 advantage. About 25 battalion tactical groups (20,000

people) with air support advanced from Crimea. On the Ukrainian side, the border with the peninsula was defended by 1500–1600 people. Of them, only 250 fighters of the 137th Marine Infantry Battalion were directly on the border with Crimea.

To understand the difficult situation in which the Ukrainian military found themselves, it is enough to say that these 250 military personnel from the 137th battalion were divided into three platoons. The first platoon (15-45 people) was located at a support point directly in front of the Chongar bridge. The second platoon held positions at the Kalanchak checkpoint. And the third platoon was at the village of Kairy – this is the Chaplynka checkpoint, opposite the "Titan" chemical plant. These three platoons met the occupiers on February 24.

Who is to blame for the catastrophe in the south? Military personnel, who for obvious reasons cannot publicly criticize the political leadership, hint at a lack of personnel. The defense plan assumed that the southern direction should be protected by four brigades. In reality, on February 24, 2022, only one brigade in incomplete composition defended the border with Crimea.

Zelensky categorically refused to implement the defense plan. Even though, starting in November, US intelligence directly indicated that Putin was planning to start a war. The first and main reason why the president refused to strengthen the defense was financial. On February 18, six days before the start of the full-scale war, in an interview with the news agency "RBK-Ukraine," Zelensky frankly and with childlike directness explained his position: "We can increase the army two or three times, but then, for example, we will not be able to build roads." In other words, Zelensky did not want to give up the corruption scheme, hoping that everything would somehow calm down. Putin is just scaring, and the money is here and now, just reach out.

The second reason for the catastrophe in the south was the wrong strategy for defending this direction. According to Major General Sokolov, the strategic defense line should have run along the Dnieper. Blowing up the Antonovsky Bridge could, at least for a few days, stop the Russian troops in front of Kherson. During these days, it was possible to stabilize the situation and pull up reserves. But the Antonovsky Bridge was not even mined. Whose fault is this? Some believe that the commander of the Joint Forces, Lieutenant General Serhiy Naev, should be held responsible. Others blame the President's Office, which prohibited blowing up bridges without their order.

The analysis of military operations in 2023 showed that on the Zaporizhzhia direction, the Russians took half a year to build an impregnable line of defense with numerous minefields and a multi-level system of fortifications. All this could have been built on the border with Crimea. Especially since the geographical location for defense there is much more favorable than in Zaporizhzhia. However, by the time of the invasion, the Ukrainian army had not built anything similar. General Sokolov explains this by the fact that the land plots on which it was necessary to build a system of fortifications on the border with Crimea were privately owned. Without the introduction of martial law, the army had no right to use them or mine them. Only the president had the right to introduce martial law or a defense plan.

Without a doubt, the forces available at that time for the defense of the south were extremely insufficient. This problem could only be solved by increasing mobilization. And again, only the Supreme Commander-in-Chief — President Zelensky — could give an order for this. Neither Zaluzhny, Naev, nor Defense Minister Reznikov had such powers.

Transferring troops to the south from other directions was impossible. Troops were lacking everywhere, not only at the border with Crimea. Kyiv was covered by only one 72nd brigade. Kharkiv, the second largest city in Ukraine, was covered by only one 92nd brigade. Taking troops from Donbas was extremely risky, as the main strike was expected there.

Additional mobilization, which Zelensky refused, could have saved both Melitopol and Mariupol. But it was not conducted. In the opinion of the Ukrainian president, building roads was more important than preparing for war.

How Kharkiv Was Saved from Occupation

The city of Kharkiv, with a population of 1.5 million, was considered one of the most dangerous defense directions. The reason was its geographical position: the city is located just 30 kilometers from the Russian border. On January 20, additional alarm was caused by Zelensky's remark, who for some reason publicly suggested that "Kharkiv could be occupied." As it turned out, the city really was one step away from occupation.

On the night of February 24, the people of Kharkiv woke up to

explosions. Around five in the morning, Russians began shelling the northeastern residential areas with artillery. At the same time, an offensive began from the direction of the Russian border. Several small villages separating Kharkiv from Russia did not stop the occupiers. As it turned out, the Ukrainian Armed Forces had no fortifications on the near or far approaches to the city.

Russian troops appeared on the ring road of Kharkiv, from the direction of Pyatykhatky and Tsyrkuny, already at noon on February 24. Here, the first battle began: Ukrainian military burned several units of enemy armored vehicles. At that time, the first photos of dead Russian soldiers against the entrance sign with the name of the city went viral.

Later, one of the captured Russians said that their task that day was to break through to the center of Kharkiv to Freedom Square, to capture some administrative building and hang a Russian flag on it. Like under Kyiv, the Russians did not expect organized resistance.

On February 25-26, the occupiers entered the city several times from the direction of the ring road, but each time unsuccessfully. In the first days of the war, they simply did not expect Kharkiv to be defended so actively. As it turned out, in vain. On February 26, on the highway leading from Staryi Saltiv, Ukrainians smashed an entire column of the Russian National Guard: militarized police that had no heavy weaponry.

Through the internet, Russians tried to intimidate the defenders of Kharkiv with the announcement that the city awaited a night landing of thousands of paratroopers from helicopters. The calculation of this disinformation was only that the Ukrainian Armed Forces would surrender the city without a fight. There was no helicopter landing. Ukrainian military by that time already had portable anti-aircraft systems, both American and Soviet. Therefore, Russians did not dare to risk their helicopters.

February 27 should be considered the turning point of Kharkiv's defense, when in the morning several dozen Russian special forces broke into the city in Tiger armored vehicles. They did not reach the city center, but they managed to capture school № 134 and secure themselves in it. This became their fatal mistake. In Kharkiv, along with the police and volunteers, there were from 30 to 40 thousand Ukrainian servicemen. The school was almost immediately blocked, after which it was fired upon from a tank. Two hours later, a fire started in the school and most of the Russians were killed. Several

people surrendered.

After the events of February 27, the Russian army no longer attempted to enter the city. Instead, they regularly shelled Kharkiv with artillery and missiles. But the risk of capturing the country's second-largest city by population had disappeared by then.

The Secret Advisor on Blowing Up Bridges

One of the biggest mysteries of the beginning of the war, which remains unresolved due to military law restrictions, is the question of blowing up bridges in Mykolaiv, Kyiv, and the Kyiv region.

The Antonivskyi Bridge in Kherson is not included in this list. As it turned out, despite the obvious threat of an attack from Russia, this strategic bridge was not mined before the war. And during the events of February 24-26, the military simply did not dare or did not manage to blow it up, since Ukrainian troops were still on the left bank and had to retreat to Kherson through this bridge.

For a better understanding of the situation, it might be worth quoting an interview with Mykhailo Podolyak, advisor to the head of the President's Office, given to the newspaper "Fakty" in September 2022.

"That morning of February 24, we were not psychologically ready to blow up bridges, for example... The first few hours we thought: we invested money in comfort for people, how now to destroy all this?.. We thought that on the other side there are also people, that they would treat houses, bridges, and other infrastructure carefully," recalls Yermak's advisor.

As we already know, two days before the final occupation of Kherson, Ukrainian troops retreated to the neighboring Mykolaiv. This regional center was also not ready for defense, but fortunately, General Dmytro Marchenko, who arrived in Mykolaiv on February 25, managed to quickly organize the city's defense and save it from occupation. And here I draw your attention again. An episode from an interview with Marchenko, which he gave to the local site "Nikvesti" in May 2022, is interesting.

In a conversation with a journalist, the general recalls that during the defense of Mykolaiv, when the fate of the 500-thousand city hung by a thread, an unnamed person from Kyiv repeatedly called by phone

and demanded to blow up the Varvarivskyi Bridge. An astonishing demand, considering that this bridge, unlike the Antonivskyi in Kherson, has a completely different geographical significance for defense. Kherson is located on the western (right) bank of the Dnieper. The Antonivskyi Bridge connected Kherson with the eastern (left) bank, to which the Russians from Crimea were approaching. Therefore, blowing it up could at least delay the enemy.

The Varvarivskyi Bridge in Mykolaiv, on the contrary, connects the eastern (left) bank of the Southern Bug, where the city is located, with the safe western (right) bank, from which the road to Odesa runs. That is, if Marchenko had blown up the Varvarivskyi Bridge as ordered from Kyiv, then Mykolaiv would have been completely encircled, and the Ukrainian Armed Forces would have lost communication with the Odesa group.

"They took us by the Mariupol plan – to encircle, to push out all (Ukrainian) troops to the center of the city, to some object, let's say, the 61 Communards Plant, cut off electricity, water and wait until we start to go mad, until we run out of ammunition, food, water," said Dmytro Marchenko.

The next episode of the war, raising many questions, is related to blowing up bridges in Kyiv. According to BBC sources, on February 26, an unnamed person called the then head of the Security Service of Ukraine, Ivan Bakanov, demanding that he order a special unit of the SBU to blow up the bridges across the Dnieper. Bakanov decided to pass this task to the military and called Zaluzhny so that his subordinates could perform the explosion, but the commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces refused.

"Blow up the bridges? No way! That would be a betrayal of those left on the left bank of the Dnieper — both military and civilians," Zaluzhny said.

So who could be Bakanov's interlocutor, who ordered the head of the Security Service of Ukraine to blow up the bridges in the capital? There are only two options: Zelensky or Yermak. Considering the configuration of Ukrainian power, other persons are excluded.

And why such panic? As of February 26, the Russians were indeed close to Kyiv. But they did not capture either Brovary or the residential areas on the left bank of Kyiv. Why would one of these two: Zelensky or Yermak, panic so much that they were ready to preemptively, without a fight, hand over more than a million residents of the left bank to the enemy? It is quite possible that it was not panic

at all, but the execution of some plan. But this plan was definitely not in the interests of Ukraine.

And finally, the third episode concerns the situation with the blowing up of the bridge across the Irpin River in the Kyiv region. As claimed by a former intelligence officer of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, Colonel of the Armed Forces Roman Chervinsky, the bridge across the Irpin River, which would have stopped the rapid advance of the Russians into Kyiv, was blown up on February 25 contrary to the order of the President's Office.

"A serviceman came to our unit. He was the deputy commander of the 72nd brigade. He says, when they managed to reach Irpin overnight, set up some positions to stop the Russians, but he realized that they would not be able to. The forces are not equal. He has one brigade, and there are tens of thousands of people and equipment coming from the other side. And he says, logically I needed to blow up the bridges across Irpin. He says, when I reported this situation to the brigade commander, he said: "The President's Office sent a command – do not blow up the bridges without their sanction." This is the second day of the war. He says, I blew it up on my own discretion," Chervinsky said in an interview with the site "Censor.net".

So, two calls and one order. If the Varvarivskyi Bridge had been blown up, then Mykolaiv and its defenders would have faced the fate of Mariupol. If the bridges across the Dnieper in Kyiv had been blown up, then the Russians would have occupied almost half of the capital, where more than 1 million people live, without a fight. If the military had followed the President's Office's order not to blow up the bridge across the Irpin River, then Russian troops could suddenly appear on the northern and eastern outskirts of Kyiv.

The Bakanov Case

Almost immediately after his inauguration in May 2019, President Volodymyr Zelensky appointed his childhood friend Ivan Bakanov as the head of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU). If you remember, Vanya (Ivan) and Vova (Volodymyr) not only studied in the same school but even lived in the same entrance of an apartment building in Kryvyi Rih.

This appointment was purely a political decision – the head of the state wanted to see someone he could trust in such a key position.

Although Bakanov had no experience in law enforcement or public service, society accepted this appointment calmly. If a stage comedian could become president, then his personnel appointments certainly wouldn't surprise anyone. Moreover, Ivan Bakanov hadn't made a spectacle of himself on stage but worked for Zelensky as the director of "Kvartal 95". And in general, he looked like a calm and intelligent person with glasses.

In 2005, Yulia Tymoshenko, during her first premiership, lobbied for her close associate Olexandr Turchynov to be appointed as the head of the SBU. He, too, had no experience in law enforcement at the time. But Turchynov proved quite successful in the position of the head of the Security Service, with no scandals occurring under his watch. Nine years later, after Yanukovych fled, Turchynov even served as the acting president.

Unlike Turchynov, Ivan Bakanov's leadership of the SBU turned out to be a real disaster for Ukraine. The people he appointed were not just unprofessional or corrupt – he placed a Russian agent, Oleh Kulynych, in one of the leading positions in the SBU, who passed all the secret information to Moscow and sabotaged the work of the Ukrainian special service.

According to journalist Yuriy Butusov, it's likely that Bakanov received a large bribe for appointing Kulynych as the head of the SBU's Crimean Department (this department was based in Kherson but was responsible for intelligence activities in Crimea occupied by Russians). According to formal procedure, Kulynych was appointed to this position by a decree from Zelensky, but his candidacy was submitted for the president's consideration by the head of the SBU, Ivan Bakanov.

It's hard to explain the appointment of Andriy Naumov as the head of the SBU's Internal Security Department by anything other than corruption, especially since he fled the country with hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash the day before the war started.

To spare readers unnecessary details, let me explain the consequences of Bakanov's actions as succinctly as possible. Oleh Kulynych, from the moment of his appointment in June 2019 until the start of the war, sabotaged the SBU's agent activities in Crimea and regularly leaked secret information to Moscow via the Threema messenger. Additionally, he misled the leadership and lobbied for the appointment of other Russian agents to positions in the SBU. Likely, Kulynych's reports, in which he denied the preparation of Russian

troops in Crimea for an attack on Kherson region, influenced Zelensky.

After the war began, Oleh Kulynych immediately left Kherson for Kyiv and for some time was the assistant to the head of the SBU, Ivan Bakanov, for especially important assignments. In the summer of 2022, he was arrested. The State Bureau of Investigation (SBI) has a large number of audio recordings of Kulynych's conversations with Volodymyr Sivkovich – a former ally of Yanukovych who has been living in Moscow since 2014 and working for the FSB.

How did this Russian agent appear and manage to hold such a high position in the SBU? Oleh Kulynych was born in 1969 in Smila, Cherkasy region. From 1989 to 1994, he studied at the Higher School of the KGB of the USSR, later renamed the FSB Academy of Russia, and even served in the Federal Counterintelligence Service of the RF for some time. In 1994, Kulynych returned to Ukraine and worked in the Security Service of Ukraine until 2006.

According to the lustration law adopted under President Poroshenko, it is prohibited in Ukraine to appoint people who served in Russian special services after 1991 to public positions. However, this direct prohibition was ignored not only by Bakanov, who submitted Kulynych's candidacy for the president's consideration, but also by Zelensky, who signed the decree on the appointment. They both violated the law, and their actions led to severe consequences for the state's defense capability.

Another interesting detail about the Russian agent Oleh Kulynych is that after leaving the SBU in 2006, he became the head of one of the enterprises of the state company "Energoatom," which was led by Andriy Derkach at the time. Yes, the same Derkach who in 2020 took an active part in discrediting the candidate for the President of the USA, Joe Biden, and was then sanctioned by the US. Andriy Derkach also studied at the FSB academy in Moscow, simultaneously with Oleh Kulynych.

According to the State Bureau of Investigation, after his appointment in Kherson, Kulynych had access to all the secret information circulating in the Security Service of Ukraine. He received up-to-date information about what was discussed at meetings and what was happening in the state. Kulynych passed all the received information to Sivkovich through the internet messenger, using code names and titles for conspiracy.

As for Andriy Naumov, another traitor appointed by Zelensky upon Bakanov's recommendation, his story is somewhat different. Naumov

had no relation to the special services before his appointment to the SBU. He worked for a while in the Prosecutor General's Office, where he was responsible for material and technical supply, then moved to work at the State Enterprise for managing the Chernobyl zone. And almost immediately after Zelensky's victory, this man was appointed the head of the SBU's Main Directorate of Internal Security. A year later, the president appointed Naumov as the first deputy chairman of the SBU and gave him the first ever new military rank in Ukraine's history – SBU brigadier general. This rank was invented to transition to NATO standards. And the first to be awarded according to this standard was the future traitor.

As it turned out, Naumov's appointment was lobbied by Kulynych. It was important for the Russians to remove the first deputy head of the SBU, Ruslan Baranetsky – a renowned counterintelligence officer with considerable experience against Russia. And, of course, with Bakanov's support, Kulynych succeeded. On July 24, 2021, Baranetsky was dismissed, and Naumov was appointed in his place.

Currently, Ukrainian investigators have no evidence that Andriy Naumov was a Russian agent. As Ukrainian journalist Yuriy Butusov believes, Naumov's rapid career ascent is explained by the fact that he managed smuggling at customs and was Ivan Bakanov's "wallet." A part of the money from the import or export of goods into/out of Ukraine without paying state duty went to the "black fund." Then these funds went to support Zelensky's party and other operations, with a portion of the money taken by the scheme's participants and their patrons.

On February 23, 2022, a few hours before the Russian invasion, Andriy Naumov left Ukraine by car. After fleeing, he lived in Germany for several months. Then Naumov managed to leave the European Union for Serbia. All this time, the Ukrainian Prosecutor General's Office showed no interest in issuing an international search warrant for Naumov. On June 7, 2022, Naumov was detained in Serbia when crossing the border with North Macedonia.

In the BMW car, from which he tried to leave Serbia, they found 600,000 euros in cash, 125,000 US dollars, and precious stones, including diamonds. Along with Naumov in the car was a Ukrainian entrepreneur, German citizen Alexander Akst, a subject of several journalistic investigations related to cigarette smuggling from Ukraine to the EU. On October 6, 2023, a Serbian court sentenced Andriy Naumov to one year in prison for money laundering.

Oleh Kulynych was arrested by the SBI together with the SBU on July 16, 2022. The Russian agent was caught in correspondence. Most likely, the "super-secure" messenger Threema, in which he corresponded with Sivkovich, was hacked by American intelligence services, or the program developers provided them with a backdoor. Then the Americans passed the information about Kulynych to their Ukrainian colleagues.

Audio evidence was added to the criminal case in an original way: the SBI claimed that the conversations between Sivkovich and Kulynych were discovered on a flash drive found during a search in a house in Kyiv at Peredova Street 5, "on the third floor in an apartment where no one lived." According to the SBI, the conversations with Kulynych were recorded on his iPhone by Sivkovich himself. But how the audio recordings of conversations ended up in a Kyiv apartment, no one can explain.

Law enforcement also found a hard drive in Kulynych's car containing 7 audio files, identical to those found in the empty apartment.

In court, Kulynych acknowledged the authenticity of the files on the flash drive. But he and his lawyers claim that communication with Sivkovich was supposedly aimed at obtaining valuable agent data for Ukraine.

The scandal with Kulynych's arrest led to Zelensky no longer being able to keep his childhood friend in this position. Especially during the war. On July 17, 2022, the president suspended Bakanov from leading the SBU for "non-performance (improper performance) of official duties, which led to human casualties or other severe consequences, or created a threat of such consequences." Two days later, the Verkhovna Rada approved his dismissal.

After Ivan Bakanov's dismissal, he was never called in for questioning by an investigator, although his testimony could have provided a lot of valuable information in the Kulynych case. Moreover, Bakanov simply disappeared for several months in an unknown direction. Exactly a year after his dismissal, on July 19, 2023, he posted a fresh photo from Poltava on social networks and reported receiving a lawyer's certificate in Poltava region.

According to Ukrainian law, a lawyer can be prosecuted only with the consent of the regional prosecutor or the Prosecutor General or his deputy. By obtaining the status of a lawyer, Ivan Bakanov shielded himself from the risk of arrest by the president-uncontrolled National

Anti-Corruption Bureau. Such a situation could very well occur if Naumov in Serbia suddenly starts giving testimonies about customs smuggling.

The Mariupol Tragedy – Europe's Largest Catastrophe of the 21st Century

What happened in Mariupol was beyond any negative scenario anticipated. The "bloodiest" war forecast, made public in early February 2022, was associated with the storming of Kyiv. Then, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the United States, General Mark Milley, stated that in the event of a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, Kyiv would fall within 72 hours, leading to 15,000 Ukrainian military deaths and 4,000 Russian military deaths. It was also predicted that as a result of military actions, 50,000 civilians would die or be wounded.

Strangely enough, Ukrainian forces could have held Mariupol under one condition: if the assault on the city came from the direction of the DPR, that is, from the east and north. In 2015, several months of heavy fighting took place about 10-12 kilometers east of Mariupol for the settlement of Shyrokyne. Then, the Ukrainian Armed Forces managed to hold the dominant heights, preventing the Russians from shelling the city with artillery. However, in 2022, no defense plan anticipated that Mariupol would be completely encircled just three days after the war began. I remind you that on February 25, the day after the invasion, Russian troops were on the outskirts of Melitopol: a 200-thousand city located halfway between Crimea and Mariupol.

The Ukrainian army in the south had a critically insufficient level of equipment. It turned out that only one brigade was defending the Kherson region at the border with Crimea, and even it was not fully staffed. Melitopol and Berdyansk simply had no one to defend them. President Volodymyr Zelensky had 4 months from the time he received intelligence data about Putin's plans to start the war. Unfortunately, he did almost nothing to strengthen the state's defense capability.

Zelensky's infamous words: "We can increase the army two or three times, but then, for example, we won't be able to build roads," which he used a week before the war began to explain his reluctance to increase funding for the Armed Forces of Ukraine, became a death sentence not only for the Ukrainian defenders of Mariupol but also for

tens of thousands of civilians. How many of them died in their apartments and on the streets during those few weeks of siege: 10,000, 15,000, 25,000? We will likely only find out after the city is de-occupied.

The war began for the residents of Mariupol at 3:45 a.m. with artillery shelling. In the morning, the assault on the city began, but not from the east, as in 2015, but from the north – from the Volnovakha highway. Near the village of Pavlopil, the first battle took place, during which the Russians lost several tanks and could not break through to the near approaches to Mariupol. After that, the enemy changed the direction of the main strike and began to encircle the city from the west, from the direction of Melitopol, where there were neither fortification systems nor enough troops for defense.

As the further course of the war showed, on the example of the not entirely successful Ukrainian counteroffensive in the Zaporizhzhia region in June 2023, defense can be quite effective with continuous minefields and a system of trench fortifications. Nothing like this was near Mariupol. As one of the defenders of "Azovstal," Kyrylo Berkut, later recalled, before the war, Ukrainian military did not have the opportunity to build fortifications near Mariupol. This land was in use by farmers, and no one could or wanted to transfer it to the military without imposing martial law. Therefore, Mariupol could effectively defend only from the eastern direction, where positions of Ukrainian troops were arranged since 2015, and where, due to the proximity to the front line, no agricultural activity was conducted.

As for the city itself, in the first two days, Mariupol, though shelled by artillery and aviation, did not yet suffer catastrophic damage. Some residents even continued to go to work. In the first days, the Russians bombed critical infrastructure enterprises. Here is how the mayor of Mariupol, Vadym Boychenko, described these events in an interview with the Ukrainian news website "Left Bank":

"For the first five days, they systematically targeted 15 electrical lines that provided electricity to the city. As a result, all were destroyed – the city was left without electricity and heat in a frost of 11 degrees. ...When they cut off the electric pump stations that pump water, we were left without water. We switched to a backup pump – it would have lasted us for a year. But someone led the enemy artillery there, and it bombed that source too. Then we were left without water."

From February 28, the shelling of the city intensified. The Russians

used rocket artillery, "Tochka-U" missiles, and aviation. Initially, Mariupol was bombed by two planes, dropping bombs every half hour, then five planes began to bomb.

Civilians had two days to evacuate. On February 26, the Russians entered Berdyansk without a fight, and the next day they cut off the roads connecting Mariupol with the rear. For the first two days, it was still possible to leave the city by train, then the railway tracks were bombed.

On February 28, Mariupol was surrounded. According to Mayor Boychenko's assessment, in the first days of the war, about 140,000 people managed to leave the city by private transport and railway. To prevent organized evacuation, the occupiers bombed parking lots for municipal vehicles and city buses.

At the time of the encirclement, about 300-350 thousand people remained in Mariupol. Some stores closed almost immediately after the war began, but some grocery stores and pharmacies operated until March 2, as long as there was electricity. Looting began on March 2-3 after the power was cut off. Food was taken first. Massive looting of industrial goods began in April, after the occupation began. Russians and some residents of Donetsk, associated with the military of the DPR, came to Mariupol in trucks and took away all valuable things from closed stores and offices.

On March 7, gas was turned off in Mariupol's homes. This significantly worsened the humanitarian situation: people could no longer cook food at home and heat their apartments. After that, locals began to light fires in courtyards and cook on open fires.

The mass death of the city's residents began on March 7-8. The Left Bank district, located in the eastern part of the city, across the Kalmius River, suffered the most initially. That's when the bloodthirstiness and inhumanity of the Russian army became fully apparent. They shelled and bombed Mariupol following the Syrian scenario: regardless of the risk of civilian casualties.

The most shelling and air strikes occurred from March 8 to March 14. After March 14, some outskirts of Mariupol came under Russian control, and the battles moved to the central part of the city, then towards "Azovstal" and the port.

"They didn't touch the port. I think they left the port for themselves because you understand that the Azov Sea in Russia is shallow, 4-5 meters deep, and then the Taganrog Bay. Our depth of the Azov Sea

reaches 14 meters – ships can freely enter. I think they understood this, so they were tasked with destroying everything except for the port. That's why there are practically no hits on the port. The only place that was hit was the grain terminal, so we couldn't take grain from there, mill flour, and bake bread," recalls the city's mayor, Vadym Boychenko.

Starting on March 15, the city's residents began to evacuate from the city independently, on foot, and by car. By that time, a significant part of the city was already under Russian control, so the bombings subsided a bit. For about a week, it was relatively safe to leave towards Zaporizhzhia. During this time, about 100,000 people left Mariupol. Then the Russians closed the evacuation route towards Ukraine and allowed departure only to Russia.

Many city residents died in their apartments. When a Russian missile hit a building, it often caused the collapse of an entrance or a fire. The explosion wave jammed doors, and people were trapped in a fire, unable to descend to lower floors. Thus, hundreds of civilians were burned alive in their apartments. Thousands more died under the rubble or from flying debris while on the street.

At least several hundred Mariupol residents were buried alive in the basements of their homes. If an airstrike hit an entrance and the building's structures collapsed onto the lower floors, it sometimes completely blocked the exit from the basement for everyone seeking shelter from the shelling.

Evidence of many of the Russian military's crimes appeared only after the defense of the city ended. The advisor to the city head, Pavlo Andryushchenko, reported in March 2023 that during the clearing of ruins of a house on Novorossiyskaya Street, 16, in its basement, about 200 bodies of deceased Mariupol residents were found. Only about 70 corpses were retrieved and buried: only those that were relatively intact. All other deceased were taken away with construction debris. Earlier, in May 2022, a similar horrific discovery was made during the clearing of the rubble of multi-story buildings in the area of suburban gas station-2 on Mira Avenue. In the basement of a destroyed building, several dozen bodies of people who died under the rubble with a high degree of decomposition were found.

After Mariupol, the Russians conducted their barbaric assaults on cities on other fronts. It's worth mentioning the obliterated Bakhmut, Popasna, Maryinka, and Avdiivka. But in Bakhmut, Maryinka, and Avdiivka, residents had the opportunity to evacuate, and during the

defense of these cities, search and rescue services operated for some time. Popasna is the only exception in this list. According to the testimony of surviving eyewitnesses, during the shelling of this small town, a situation similar to Mariupol was observed, resulting in the death of several hundred people.

The world was shocked by the horrific footage of the aftermath of the airstrike on the Drama Theatre, where hundreds of people were sheltering. The Russian pilot was not even deterred by the fact that "CHILDREN" was written in large letters on the square in front of the building. As a result of this mass murder, at least 300 civilians died.

The tragedy of Mariupol occurred not only because this city was in the path of an army for which the life of civilians means nothing. Another reason for the humanitarian catastrophe was the encirclement of the city. Unlike Bakhmut and Avdiivka, Mariupol residents lost the ability to evacuate to safe regions just two days after the war began, so they simply sat in their apartments and basements, waiting for death. Search and rescue and fire services in the city did not operate. No one cleared the rubble. Emergency medical services stopped responding to calls. People who were injured by bomb fragments most likely died from bleeding out.

According to the chief doctor of the Mariupol regional hospital, Oleksandr Yaroshenko, the number of dead in the city is about 20,000 people. The city's mayor, Vadym Boychenko, agrees with this figure. The exact number of victims is unknown, as Russian authorities meticulously hide this data. Satellite images of Mariupol and its surroundings show that the dead, who began to be collected from the streets and exhumed from makeshift burials in courtyards after the occupation began, were mostly buried in mass graves at four cemeteries near the settlements of Mangush, Stary Krym, Vinohradne, and in Mariupol itself.

Examining the causes of the Mariupol tragedy, attention should be paid to the actions of not only the Russian army but also the Ukrainian one. That the brutality of the Russians is hardly limited by any boundaries is unlikely to be contested by anyone. Surrounding the city, they blocked a 5,000-strong group of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. The city was doomed – a week later, the front line was moved almost 100 kilometers away from Mariupol. What was the point of destroying residential buildings with aerial bombs? In these conditions, Mariupol would have surrendered sooner or later anyway.

As for the actions of the Ukrainian army, there are several points

that many do not wish to emphasize. Analysis of statements and interviews given by some defenders of Mariupol during the defense and after returning from Russian captivity gives grounds to assert that the actions of the "Azov" regiment's leadership can be assessed not as heroism but as adventurism, leading to terrible consequences.

Military science, which has a history of many hundreds of years, always clearly indicates that the commander of a military unit must make maximum efforts to ensure his force does not get encircled. And if it happens that his unit is encircled, the commander's main task should be to break out of the encirclement to join the main forces.

What was the commander of the "Azov" regiment, Denys Prokopenko, doing on the eve of the war? According to his wife Kateryna, on February 14, 2022, ten days before the full-scale invasion, they were sitting together in a Mariupol cafe, and he was telling her that he was developing a defense plan for Mariupol.

Undoubtedly, a defense plan for Mariupol is a very necessary thing, especially for a military commander who knows or suspects that a war will start in a few days. But Denys Prokopenko's plan, most likely, was that the "Azov" regiment would not leave Mariupol. He didn't even consider the possibility that they would have to leave the city for operational maneuver or to avoid encirclement.

February 24, the beginning of the war. Military personnel from the "Azov" regiment begin to move water and food supplies to the underground bomb shelters of "Azovstal". This plant, covering 11 square kilometers, has 36 multi-level bomb shelters, connected by several tunnels. If necessary, several thousand people could be accommodated there. On the same day, the military inspected another large metallurgical plant in Mariupol – the Ilyich Iron and Steel Works. Here is how one of the officers of the "Azov" regiment, Kyrylo Berkut, recalls those events:

"We did not get access to critical infrastructure. We just received fire safety diagrams and just planned on the maps what, how, who would act. We only got acquainted with the plant on the 24th. We were performing the combat task of repelling and repelling the enemy's attacks. They began to advance from the Volnovakha highway first, we repelled them. The enemy changed the direction of the main strike and began to encircle the city from the west side..."

On May 8, 2022, Denys Prokopenko, having been in encirclement in the bunker of the "Azovstal" plant for several weeks, gave a short interview to the editor of "Ukrainska Pravda," Sevgil Musaieva, via

satellite internet. In it, the "Azov" commander confirmed that his decision to stay in Mariupol, despite the complete encirclement, was completely deliberate.

"We consciously went into this cauldron. Understanding that, according to the defense plan, it would be necessary to conduct circular defense in the city, and it actually happened," Prokopenko stated.

These words were not a sensation. Already on February 26, at 10 a.m., that is, two days before the Russian forces cut off the route to Zaporizhzhia and completed the encirclement of the city, Prokopenko posted a video message on the "Azov" Telegram channel, stating that he orders every fighter of the "Azov" regiment to fight "to the last drop of blood." Denys Prokopenko assured that his regiment, together with the National Guard of Ukraine and other law enforcement structures, reliably defends the city of Mariupol.

How can the decision of the "Azov" commander be assessed? Indeed, Mariupol could have been defended for a long time even against superior enemy forces. But only under several conditions: if the defenders of the city are not encircled, have evacuation routes for the wounded, the possibility of replenishing ammunition and personnel. On February 26, when Russian forces easily entered Melitopol, it was clear that Mariupol would be completely encircled within a few days.

To avoid catastrophe, on February 26-27, 2022, the military command of the Armed Forces of Ukraine should have ordered the Ukrainian forces in Mariupol to urgently retreat from the city: either to join the main forces or to conduct military operations west of Mariupol to prevent encirclement. Apparently, such an order was not given. We do not know how President Zelensky, as the Supreme Commander, interfered with the military's work. One way or another, Valeriy Zaluzhny, as the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, should have convinced Zelensky to agree that Mariupol needed to be urgently abandoned.

From this puzzle, we know two components. Prokopenko, as the commander of the Ukrainian forces in Mariupol, was very eager to fight in the city, even though the defense in complete encirclement was doomed to defeat in advance. Moreover, "Azov" did not even have enough military equipment and ammunition before the city's defense began.

"In 'Azov', there were up to 7 APCs in the 1st battalion, 4-5

operational MT-LBs in the second battalion, a small number of APCs and armored vehicles. (According to the standard, there should be 30 APCs in a battalion)... Only one company in each battalion was fully staffed. Part of the artillery was under deep repair in the rear. There was a catastrophic shortage of shells," says "Azov" officer Kyrylo Berkut.

Prokopenko had the opportunity to start defense on the distant approaches to Mariupol to avoid encirclement. But the "Azov" regiment and the 36th Marine Brigade of the Armed Forces of Ukraine did not leave the city but decided to prepare for combat in urban areas.

Zelensky, as subsequent episodes of the war showed, sometimes interfered in military decisions, despite lacking the required expertise. For example, informed sources claimed that the president was against withdrawing troops from Severodonetsk and Bakhmut, although the military insisted on it. In the end, both cities were still captured by the Russians after several months of urban combat. In both Severodonetsk and Bakhmut, the Ukrainian forces suffered heavy losses, as did the Russians. But the Russians in Bakhmut mainly used prisoners for the assault, who no one would particularly mourn, while the Armed Forces of Ukraine lost personnel from the regular army.

We do not know what role Zaluzhny played in the fact that the 12th Brigade of the National Guard, which included "Azov," and the 36th Marine Brigade of the Armed Forces of Ukraine remained in complete encirclement in Mariupol. Denys Prokopenko, after returning from Russian captivity, did not give any interviews that could clarify this situation. It can only be assumed that in the conversation between Prokopenko and Zaluzhny, the "Azov" commander assured that his unit was ready to defend the city and that it was not necessary to retreat from Mariupol. The bravado and adventurism of Denys Prokopenko became precisely the key factor that did not allow Zaluzhny and Zelensky to make the only correct decision to retreat from the city.

Against the backdrop of the catastrophe caused by the barbaric shelling of the city by the Russians, Prokopenko decided to present his version of events. According to him, the decision to stay in complete encirclement was justified because, in this way, Ukrainian forces attracted a large group of enemy forces to themselves, thus weakening the pressure on the Armed Forces of Ukraine in other directions.

The outcome of the defense of Mariupol is hard to call successful.

20,000 dead civilians. Out of approximately 5,000 Ukrainian military personnel, half died, and the other half were captured. On the plus side: at least 4,000 dead Russian military personnel, including two generals.

The Fate of the Captives

Despite many Ukrainians on social media accusing Zelensky of "surrendering" over 2,000 defenders of Azovstal, these claims are baseless. Zelensky's actions during those days were as adequate as possible. The situation had reached a deadlock, and there was simply no other way out. The Azov fighters and marines of the 36th Brigade had only two options: death or surrender.

I remind you that by early May 2022, the fighting near the metallurgical plant had almost ceased. Ukrainian troops hid in underground bunkers, occasionally making sorties to the surface. The occupiers, not particularly inspired by the prospect of fighting in the numerous plant buildings, opted for the tactic of using heavy aviation bombs. The underground bunkers of Azovstal had several levels, but they could not fully protect against the impact of three-ton bombs. On the night of April 28, one such bomb destroyed Azov's underground hospital, resulting in an undetermined number of casualties among patients and medics.

For the final capture of the plant territory, the Russians did not rule out the use of chemical weapons. On April 11, 2022, a representative of the DPR military command, Eduard Basurin, openly spoke of such a possibility. They were deterred only by the fact that several hundred civilians were hiding in the bunker along with the defenders of Azovstal. The use of chemical weapons against civilians threatened to worsen Russia's international isolation, so the occupiers agreed to an option where the fighters of Azovstal would supposedly be promised "evacuation" for subsequent prisoner exchange.

On May 16 and 17, Ukrainian troops surrendered, emerging from the bunker. However, just two months later, on July 29, 2022, 53 military prisoners from among the defenders of Azovstal were killed, and another 73 were injured. One of the barracks in the Olenivka camp, where about 150 prisoners had been transferred the day before, was blown up using a thermobaric flamethrower. According to one version, Russian military personnel blew up the building to cover up the facts of torture and extrajudicial executions. According to another

version, the mass murder was initiated by the Wagner PMC command, who genuinely hated the Ukrainian nationalists from "Azov" and did not want them to be exchanged for prisoners.

The commander of the "Azov" regiment Denys Prokopenko, acting commander of the 36th Marine Brigade Serhiy Volynsky, and three other senior officers were separated from the rest of the military personnel upon surrender and were transported to Moscow. Until September 21, 2022, they were in the FSS's detention center.

On September 22, as a result of a prisoner exchange, Prokopenko and the other officers ended up in Turkey. By agreement between Zelensky, Putin, and the President of Turkey, Erdogan, Russia was handed over Viktor Medvedchuk, who had been detained after attempting to flee from house arrest. Ukraine received five VIP prisoners, led by Prokopenko, and about 250 other defenders of Azovstal.

At the time of writing this book, about 1,700 Ukrainian military personnel captured in Mariupol are still in various Russian prisons. The Kremlin categorically refuses to exchange them, despite the fact that this hampers the entire exchange process. Ukraine, for its part, is not willing to continue the exchange of prisoners without including the "Azov" military personnel in the return lists.

As for Prokopenko and the other four officers, Putin agreed to exchange them for Medvedchuk on the condition that they remain in Turkey until the end of hostilities. This agreement was upheld for about a year. On July 8, 2023, after Zelensky's visit to Turkey, the military prisoners were returned to Ukraine.

Autumn 2022: An Unexpected Success of the Ukrainian Army

After the events in Mariupol, the main combat actions shifted to the Luhansk region. In late May 2022, Russian troops began an offensive on the 250,000-strong Sievierodonetsk agglomeration. Nearly a month of bloody street fighting ensued in Sievierodonetsk. Although both sides had approximately equal infantry forces, the Russians had a significant advantage in artillery shells (at least 10 to 1), which ultimately decided the battle's outcome.

On June 14, 2022, the occupiers established control over most of

the city. Ten days later, Ukrainian forces retreated from Sievierodonetsk. It seemed they could conduct a prolonged defense in neighboring Lysychansk, which is separated from Sievierodonetsk by a river and situated on a higher right bank. However, by that time, the Russians had achieved successes south of the city, creating a threat of encirclement. On June 28, Ukrainian troops began withdrawing from Lysychansk, and four days later, the occupiers declared capture of the city.

After the fall of Lysychansk, the Kremlin announced full control over the entire Luhansk region. Celebrating the victory, Putin ordered a brief rest for the soldiers who had fought in this sector of the front.

In July and August 2022, there was a relative lull in the war. The Russian army's goal in the Donbas was to capture Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, but their capabilities were limited. At the end of July, the Kremlin announced plans to hold referendums on the annexed territories joining Russia. Putin hoped that the results of the vote, scheduled for September 11, would lead to a freeze in military actions. Allegedly, after the formal annexation of the captured territories to Russia, the Ukrainian leadership would fear launching an offensive to reclaim them.

To further intimidate Kyiv, the former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev threatened in his Telegram channel to use nuclear weapons if the Ukrainian army tried to "attack" the new Russian territories. As subsequent events showed, this bluff deterred no one. The Ukrainian Armed Forces were preparing for an offensive, the primary goal of which was to liberate Kherson.

For the first time since the war began, Ukrainians successfully employed disinformation. In July and August 2022, Ukrainian politicians regularly reported that the main strike of the Armed Forces would target the occupiers' positions on the right bank of the Dnipro.

On July 9, Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk called on national television for residents of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions to leave their homes due to the impending Ukrainian offensive. Residents of occupied Kherson were advised to urgently prepare shelters for themselves.

On the same day, July 9, President Volodymyr Zelensky publicly ordered the Southern Operational Command to reclaim the occupied territories. On July 24, an official of the Kherson Regional Military Administration, Serhiy Khlan, declared that "by September, Kherson region will definitely be liberated, and all the occupiers' plans will

fail."

The calculation proved correct. The Russian command began hastily strengthening their grouping on the right bank. Since the occupiers then had rather limited resources, this reinforcement occurred at the expense of weakening other front sectors.

In July and August, the Ukrainian army liberated several villages on the right bank, but no major breakthrough occurred. The offensive was very challenging. However, suddenly, the fighting intensified on an entirely different front sector – in the Kharkiv region. On September 6, the Armed Forces of Ukraine broke through the front near the city of Balakliya and within a week liberated a vast area – about 6000 square kilometers, including the cities of Kupiansk and Izium. A few days later, the cities of Lyman and Sviatohirsk were also liberated.

According to Russian military bloggers, Ukrainian forces found the least protected section of the Russian defense, broke through it, and began rapidly advancing deeper into the territory on light armored vehicles, trying to avoid direct combat. Due to the threat of encirclement, the occupiers hastily left the aforementioned cities, abandoning about 200 tanks and other armored vehicles.

Since the front had collapsed, the further intrigue was merely at what line the advancing Ukrainian troops would stop. The offensive momentum began to wane after two weeks. Unfortunately, the Armed Forces lacked the strength to liberate the cities of Svatove and Kreminna in the Luhansk region. They were about 10 kilometers short of reaching both cities. By this time, the Russians had received reinforcements, and the front line stabilized.

As for the offensive on Kherson, it also proceeded according to an unexpected scenario. Ukrainian military decided to focus not on frontal attacks but on missile strikes on logistics, command posts, and supply systems. In this, the invaluable service was provided by American HIMARS systems. At that time, the Russians could not offer anything similar, so the situation for them on the right bank of the Dnipro significantly worsened. After the partial destruction of the Antonivskyi Bridge in Kherson, the supply of troops was threatened.

On November 9, 2022, the commander of the Russian troop group, General Sergey Surovikin, announced the withdrawal of troops from Kherson and the right bank of the Dnipro. According to him, this was necessary because Kherson and nearby settlements could not be adequately defended, and the civilian population was threatened by

shelling from the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

On November 10, Ukrainian troops liberated the large village of Snihurivka, then the village of Kyselivka, about 15 kilometers from Kherson. The next day, November 11, the Armed Forces of Ukraine entered Kherson without a fight. It is worth noting that the Russians retreated quite organized, not forgetting to loot local museums and export valuable equipment from local hospitals. Not wanting to complicate the situation, the Ukrainian forces simply waited while the occupiers crossed to the left bank over an improvised bridge of barges connected together near the supports of the destroyed Antonivskyi Bridge.

2023: Deterioration of the Situation on the Front

It seemed that the successful autumn campaign of 2022, during which the Ukrainian army managed to liberate significant territories in the Kherson and Kharkiv regions, had every chance to continue. Although delayed, the Armed Forces of Ukraine began receiving modern artillery and short-range missiles from the USA and other Western allies. The M142 HIMARS – highly mobile missile systems with satellite guidance – especially proved effective. At that time, until the introduction of guided aerial bombs, the Russians were losing in precision weaponry.

Another advantage for the AFU became FPV drones. First actively used in the summer of 2022, by autumn, these light, maneuverable drones equipped with explosives became almost as significant in combat as artillery. However, the Russians quickly copied this new technology and within a few months reduced the gap in FPV drone usage.

In January 2023, the AFU faced a serious problem. The Russian command changed its combat tactics. This became evident for the first time in the Donbas, during the attacks on the cities of Soledar and Bakhmut. For the assault on Ukrainian positions, the occupiers began using small infantry groups, primarily consisting of former prisoners.

During the battles for Sievierodonetsk and Lysychansk in the summer of 2022, the Russian army achieved success due to a multiple superiority in artillery. This tactic was effective but could not last indefinitely. In the first year of combat, Russia spent about 10 million

artillery shells while its own production did not exceed 2 million per year. The use of infantry allowed for not depleting artillery stocks to a critical minimum. And since the assault troops were Russian prison inmates, the issue of casualties during the assaults concerned few.

In the new war tactic, Putin was greatly assisted by Yevgeny Prigozhin – a long-time acquaintance from St. Petersburg. Prigozhin had previously performed various delicate assignments for the Kremlin. He owned the infamous "Russian trolls" bot farm in Olgino, which played a significant role in the 2016 US presidential election. Prigozhin also supported the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad and African regimes friendly to Russia through his private military company "Wagner".

For participation in the war against Ukraine, Prigozhin was given almost unlimited authority. To increase the number of Wagner Group personnel, he personally visited penal colonies, urging inmates to sign contracts. A helicopter with Prigozhin on board flew almost all over Russia, including remote Siberian and Far Eastern regions. Thieves, murderers, and rapists were offered freedom after 6 months of participation in combat, and were also promised a monthly payment of 200,000 rubles (about \$2,200).

According to Prigozhin, the chance of dying within six months of combat was 15%. Of course, this figure turned out to be significantly understated. On July 19, 2023, one of the Wagner Group commanders with the call sign "Marx" stated on the Telegram channel "Wagner Unload" that out of 78,000 participants in combat actions, 22,000 died by the end of the battles for Bakhmut (May 2023), and another 40,000 were wounded.

Prisoners among the Wagner fighters constituted the majority – 49,000 people. Based on the occupiers' own data, the mortality rate of Wagner PMC assault troops in Ukraine reached 28%. According to the UK Ministry of Defense, about 50% of the convicts recruited by Prigozhin are still alive.

In attacks on Ukrainian positions, Wagner mercenaries were almost not provided with armored cover and artillery support. This led to heavy losses in assault groups, but some of the survivors reached their objectives. Even if 9 out of 10 "meat assaults" ended in failure, the tenth assault led to success and Ukrainians abandoned their positions.

Wagner Group had another feature: former convicts were prohibited from retreating under threat of execution. Numerous videos have been published on Ukrainian Telegram channels with

interrogations of captured Wagner fighters, where they talked about cases when PMC commanders shot or beat their own soldiers to death.

The events under Bakhmut showed that the Ukrainian army could not effectively respond to such tactics of warfare. As a result, for the first time in several months, the AFU began to retreat. On January 12, 2023, Soledar was abandoned, followed by three more months of fierce fighting, after which Ukrainian forces retreated from Bakhmut.

Despite setbacks in the Donbas, overall Ukrainians remained fairly optimistic about the war's prospects. In April and May 2023, their hopes were tied to an upcoming counteroffensive in the south, in the Zaporizhzhia region. However, as is already known, it ended in failure. After several months of relative calm, in October 2023, the Russians began their own offensive operation: in the area of the city of Avdiivka, 15 km west of Donetsk.

The defense of Avdiivka revealed a new problem for the Ukrainian army: the absence of a well-prepared second line of defense. Unlike the Russians, who in June 2023 successfully repelled the AFU counteroffensive thanks to minefields and multi-kilometer trenches, the Ukrainians had nothing similar. And while the absence of minefields could be attributed to a lack of mines, the absence of trenches for the second and third lines of defense around Avdiivka is hard to explain. They simply were not dug.

Lacking a technological advantage in precision rocket artillery, the Russians began to widely use guided aerial bombs with warheads ranging from 250 to 1500 kilograms. This allowed Russian aviation to conduct bombings from distances over 40 kilometers, without entering the reach of Ukrainian air defense systems.

The outcome of the bloody battles in Avdiivka and nearby villages was the retreat of the AFU to less advantageous positions. After capturing the city on February 17, 2024, the Russians could not break through the front as swiftly as the Ukrainian military had in the Kharkiv region, but overall, the situation significantly worsened. On almost all front sectors, except for the Kherson region, the AFU switched to static defense. In some sectors, the Ukrainian army was forced to retreat 20-30 kilometers. As of early May 2024, no prospects for liberating the occupied territories are visible.

How Could the War in Ukraine End?

As is known, the decision to invade Ukraine was based on erroneous intelligence data. Putin's hopes for a blitzkrieg were not fulfilled. The Ukrainian defense did not collapse, Kyiv was not taken "in three days," and the Afghan scenario did not play out. The Kremlin faced a protracted bloody war for which it was unprepared. Although the Russian army somewhat adapted to the situation by 2023, it is still not ready for a prolonged war. Despite Vladimir Putin's desire to destroy Ukraine, he cannot do so due to a lack of military equipment and artillery.

According to a report by The International Institute for Strategic Studies dated February 13, 2024, Russia lost at least 3,000 tanks in two years of war. Army replenishment is primarily from stockpiles, through the modernization of old equipment from the 1960s-70s. Russia's own production of new tanks is estimated at about 200 units per year. Yet, in 2023 alone, the Russian army lost 1,120 tanks.

A similar situation is observed with light armored vehicles and artillery. Russia spends several times more in the war than it can produce. Regarding the modernization of old tanks, their supplies are far from infinite and cannot be depleted to zero. Yes, Putin has no particular problems with mobilization resources, but a war cannot be fought only with infantry and an advantage in aviation. Artillery support and armored vehicles are needed.

To maintain the intensity of combat operations, in September 2023, Putin personally had to ask North Korean leader Kim Jong Un for supplies of artillery shells. Experts estimate that the North Korean regime supplied Russia with no more than 2 million shells, which lasted only a few months of fighting.

The fact that Russia's armored vehicle reserves are not in good shape is evidenced at least by the fact that in April 2024, the command of the Russian army was forced to urgently transfer 49 APCs from Azerbaijan to the Avdiivka area. These armored vehicles from the 15th Separate Motor Rifle Brigade of the Russian Armed Forces were in Nagorno-Karabakh. After the Kremlin agreed to withdraw its troops from the region under pressure from the Azerbaijani authorities, they were literally moved on wheels to Ukraine to support the ongoing offensive.

Starting in the autumn of 2022, the Kremlin began actively and regularly offering Ukraine and the West to freeze military actions. Ideally, for Putin, the war should end through negotiations during which Ukraine agrees to a range of demands, from not joining NATO

to territorial concessions. If Ukraine is not ready for a full settlement of the war through negotiations, Russia agrees to a temporary ceasefire along the actual front line.

Despite public statements by Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov that the main goal of the special military operation is to obtain security guarantees for Russia, this is not entirely true. Talks about NATO expansion are a formal and far from the main reason for the war. After the attempt to overthrow the government in Kyiv failed, the main goal of the Russian president became territorial acquisitions and international recognition of the annexed territories.

What does Putin want as of May 2024? As before, his proposal is peace in exchange for territories. After two years of war, the Kremlin is ready to make even partial concessions. Ukraine must recognize Russian jurisdiction over Crimea and Donbas, and in return, Putin is ready to give Kyiv the occupied territories of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions. In addition, Ukraine must refuse to join NATO, and Russia will not obstruct Ukraine's entry into the European Union.

People like Donald Trump might consider such an offer a reasonable option. After all, Ukraine only loses three regions out of 25. However, this opinion is based on a misunderstanding of Ukrainian legal norms. As I mentioned earlier, Zelensky does not have the authority to change the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Changing the borders is only possible by adopting a new Constitution, without Crimea and Donbas, or amending the existing Constitution. In both cases, a constitutional majority of 300 deputies is required, and the entire procedure takes at least six months. But the main problem is that Ukrainian society is extremely negative about the prospects of negotiations with Putin and, moreover, about giving up part of the territories. Therefore, the Kremlin's option to agree on and legislatively approve a new border is impossible.

The most likely scenario for ending the war between Russia and Ukraine is a frozen conflict similar to North and South Korea. It is also quite possible that the war will eventually transition to a low-intensity phase, during which both armies occasionally exchange fire, but the front line remains unchanged.

It is important to understand that the sudden death or removal from power of Vladimir Putin could radically change the entire situation. Regardless of who comes to power after Putin, this person will likely stop military operations and try to negotiate a ceasefire on more favorable terms for Ukraine. It should not be forgotten that this

war is based solely on the imperial ambitions of one person—Vladimir Putin. Before February 24, the Russian elite generally did not share Putin's expansionist plans but was forced to comply with the decision to wage war.

More favorable conditions for ending the war for Ukraine, which may arise after Putin's death, consist of the so-called Hong Kong scenario. As part of normalizing relations with Ukraine and the West, Russia withdraws its troops from all or most of the occupied territories, except for Crimea or Sevastopol. The Crimean Peninsula (or only Sevastopol) is leased to Russia for 49 or 99 years, after which it returns to Ukrainian jurisdiction, like Hong Kong to China.

Probably, such a scenario for ending the war will find many opponents in Kyiv, who insist on the full restoration of territorial integrity within the 1991 borders. But it is worth reminding that, at the time of writing, Ukraine does not have the capability to return Crimea by military means, at least in the foreseeable future. And the prospects for de-occupation of the entire Donbas territory are becoming increasingly elusive each month.

The most optimal option for Ukraine for now is to continue military operations, expanding strikes on military and industrial infrastructure in Russia. To do this, Ukrainian authorities must significantly increase their own production of missiles and combat drones. Freezing military actions along the existing front line is not advantageous for Ukraine, as it would give Putin the much-needed respite to rebuild military potential. The war might resume after two or three years, but the Russian army would come to the new phase of military operations more prepared.

Relying entirely on Western allies is not advisable, considering how difficult it was for the U.S. Congress to pass funding for Ukraine in April 2024. Moreover, it should not be excluded that in the coming years, politicians less friendly to providing military and financial assistance to Kyiv may come to power in some Western European countries.

Corruption During War: Money Over Fear

One might think that after the onset of a full-scale invasion, Zelensky's circle would have abandoned dubious schemes for distributing budget funds. However, neither the introduction of

martial law nor even a significant reduction in tax revenues stopped them.

The proven scheme of embezzling budget funds – on road repairs – has not disappeared. Even in the first months of the war, when the fate of the country was being decided and the occupiers stood near Kyiv, the government timely allocated money to private construction companies. In 2022, 95 billion hryvnias (approximately \$2.5 billion) were spent on roads.

Undoubtedly, road repairs in the country are necessary. The question is only that, with the introduction of martial law, contractors began to be chosen by direct contract, without holding an open tender. The project estimate was not published – also due to martial law. In Ukrainian realities, this very often led to corruption, and, accordingly, to losses of the state budget. In many cases, the project documentation included construction materials at significantly inflated prices. The fact that funds for road repairs were allocated against the backdrop of bloody battles in different parts of the country, when the Ukrainian army desperately needed ammunition, is another question.

Strangely enough, but the war expanded opportunities for corruption. The occupation of Mariupol with its metallurgical plants, problems with the export of goods through the Black Sea ports, and the forced emigration of several million people had a very negative impact on tax revenues. But the budget losses were almost completely compensated by Ukraine's allies. The USA, Canada, Germany, Great Britain, Japan, and other countries began to allocate not only military but also financial assistance. This saved the Ukrainian economy and allowed covering the deficit of the state budget even under the conditions of a significant increase in the budget of the Ministry of Defense.

A new scheme of stealing state funds was associated with military purchases. The sharp increase in the number of the Armed Forces of Ukraine required the supply of large volumes of various goods: from food to clothing, fuel, and ammunition. According to Dana Yarova, a member of the Public Anti-Corruption Council at the Ministry of Defense, large-scale thefts are directly related to the government's decree of February 28, 2022, which simplified procurement procedures for the defense department. According to this decree, which was in effect until the summer of 2023, all purchases previously conducted through open tenders were switched to direct contracts.

For a long time, Ukrainian society only suspected that large-scale theft could occur in defense procurement. But in January 2023, "Dzerkalo Tyzhnia" journalist Yuriy Nikolov accused the leadership of the Ministry of Defense of large-scale abuses, based already on specific facts. He published documents showing that the army was buying chicken eggs at 17 hryvnias each, while the retail price in stores was 6-7 hryvnias each, and the wholesale price was 4-5 hryvnias. Potatoes were ordered at 22 hryvnias per kilogram, although the retail price in stores did not exceed 8-9 hryvnias.

The news about chicken eggs outraged Ukrainian social media users. If few understood the prices of military equipment, everyone knew how much eggs cost in stores. And most importantly, society finally began to realize that the scale of corruption in the Ministry of Defense amounted to billions and was not limited to chicken eggs alone.

Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov reacted to the scandal, rejecting any accusations of corruption. However, he did so in a very strange way. According to him, journalists misunderstood everything, and the high price of eggs was explained by the fact that 170 hryvnias was the price not for 10 pieces, as sold in stores, but per kilogram of eggs. Moreover, journalists did not take delivery into account.

Reznikov's justifications only added fuel to the fire. He was quickly caught in a lie. Tender documentation confirmed that it indicated the price for 10 eggs because in Ukraine, eggs are never sold by weight. The result of this scandal was that journalists, opposition politicians, and the National Anti-Corruption Bureau began to more carefully study how the Ministry of Defense spends money.

The amounts of allocated funds were very large. The budget of the Ministry of Defense in 2022-2023 amounted to about half of the entire state budget and was almost entirely covered by Western financial assistance.

An audit conducted in January 2023, two weeks after the article about the price of chicken eggs was published, showed that the Ministry of Defense allocated more than 13 billion hryvnias (\$370 million) for the purchase of food for servicemen at prices two to three times higher than in Kyiv stores. And these were only food products for some military units in the rear. Further, facts of purchasing military uniforms and bulletproof vests at inflated prices in the first months of the war began to be revealed. A commodity examination showed that the price of 43 thousand hryvnias for a 4th class

bulletproof vest at an exchange rate of 29 hryvnias/dollar was several times higher than the prices at that time.

To satisfy society's thirst for justice, on February 2, 2023, Deputy Minister of Defense Vyacheslav Shapovalov and the head of the procurement department Bogdan Khmelnitsky were arrested. As of February 2024, they are still in pre-trial detention and preparing for trial.

According to Dana Yarova, the scandal with chicken eggs and military uniforms is just a minor episode in a vast sea of corruption. The most large-scale abuses occurred in arms purchases in 2022. Then, the Ministry of Defense distributed tens of billions of hryvnias to dubious firms, part of which simply stole the money and did not deliver the ordered weapons and ammunition to Ukraine.

By the end of 2023, it became known that since the beginning of the full-scale war, the amount of overdue accounts receivable on contracts of the Ministry of Defense amounted to 36.3 billion hryvnias. That is, the state transferred money to the supplier, but did not receive the promised goods. For comparison, 36.3 billion hryvnias is almost 3000 Canadian armored vehicles Senator, which could save thousands of lives of soldiers. Or about 5000 anti-tank missile systems FGM-148 Javelin.

It should be noted that the arrested deputy minister of defense, Vyacheslav Shapovalov, had close ties with Minister Reznikov. Previously, he was his deputy in the Ministry of Reintegration. After being promoted, Reznikov took him to the Ministry of Defense and made him his deputy again, giving Shapovalov the opportunity to manage purchases for the army.

In 2015-2017, when Reznikov was the secretary of the Kyiv City Council, Shapovalov was involved in construction issues, holding the position of deputy chairman of the Kyiv Regional Administration. At that time, Reznikov's son-in-law Dmytro Shteynhaus received a large land plot in Brovary near Kyiv with an area of 80 hectares from the regional council and began residential development on it.

Despite the scandal with Shapovalov, President Zelensky long held Oleksiy Reznikov in the position of minister. He was only dismissed on September 5, 2023. After the egg scandal, the disclosure of facts of corruption in the defense department intensified. Moreover, Reznikov proved to be a rather weak leader of the ministry. He failed such an important issue as the supply of small drones to the army, dismissively stating in December 2022 that "wedding drones are not needed by us."

But a few months later, it turned out that drones play a very important role on the front line. By the end of 2023, Ukrainian soldiers had learned to use FPV drones so skillfully that in some areas they successfully replaced artillery, holding back the advance of infantry groups of the enemy.

Since most of the information about arms purchases still remains a military secret, journalists do not have the opportunity to check how state funds were allocated. Two facts are of concern. In June 2022, when Ukraine, thanks to Western aid, began to buy weapons at a huge pace, Denis Sharapov, a former business partner of the head of the President's Office Andriy Yermak, was appointed head of the new state enterprise "Defense Procurement Agency." Once they together headed the company "European Partnership Media Group," but in 2018 both left the founders of the company.

The new agency received the authority to dispose of all funds of the Ministry of Defense provided for the purchase of weapons and military equipment. By the beginning of 2023, the state enterprise, controlled by Sharapov and Yermak, spent 355 billion hryvnias of budget funds (approximately \$9 billion). This is almost a quarter of all revenues of Ukraine's annual budget.

According to sources of the "Dzerkalo Tyzhnia," after the scandal with Shapovalov, Yermak and Sharapov withdrew from arms purchases. But the data on how military purchases were made in 2022 have not disappeared. There is every reason to believe that a significant portion of the money was simply stolen. The best confirmation of this is the total volume of overdue accounts receivable of the Ministry of Defense.

To protect information about corruption in arms procurement, on December 21, 2023, the Verkhovna Rada controlled by Zelensky elected Olga Pishchanska to the Accounting Chamber of Ukraine, and the next month, contrary to the position of Western partners, she was appointed head of this institution. It even came to the point that Penny Pritzker, the U.S. Special Representative for Economic Recovery in Ukraine, arrived in Kyiv. She once again tried to convince Ukrainian officials to cancel the dubious appointment of Olga Pishchanska. But the advice had no effect on the Office of President Zelensky. Pishchanska had been prepared for the position of head of the State Property Fund since September 2023, to replace Rustem Umerov, who headed the Ministry of Defense after Reznikov's dismissal. And Zelensky stubbornly did not want to abandon his intention.

In 2020-23, Olga Pishchanska headed the Antimonopoly Committee. As it turned out, during her leadership, this institution "forgave" companies of Ihor Kolomoisky fines of almost 5 billion hryvnias.

And finally, the main fact that explains everything. Olga Pishchanska's sister Svitlana is a longtime friend and neighbor of Zelensky, from childhood in Kryvyi Rih. As she herself says, "we grew up in the same yard." In July 2019, an Italian company owned by Svitlana Pishchanska, which owns a 15-room villa of Volodymyr Zelensky on the coast of the Italian resort Forte dei Marmi, was registered in her name. In 2019, this property was included in the president's declaration, but the next year it was no longer there because the villa formally received a new owner.

Mythologizing Zelensky's Role in the War

If we ignore the minutiae and focus solely on the historical role of Volodymyr Zelensky, the main grievance against him as president is that his incompetence and corruption left Ukraine unprepared for war. This influenced Putin's decision to start the invasion.

Zelensky himself probably understands that he will eventually have to answer for the dire consequences of his inaction. If not in a courtroom, then in the pages of history textbooks. To avoid this, the president's team is actively mythologizing his role in the events leading up to and in the first months of the war. The domestic audience receives these stories rather tepidly, as Ukrainians are well aware of the situation. However, in the West, Zelensky still manages to portray himself as a war hero. This is done not only through the manipulation of facts but also through outright lies.

For instance, in October 2023, in an interview with the British newspaper The Sun, Volodymyr Zelensky claimed that he "survived at least five assassination attempts on his life." An interesting statement, considering that a year and a half earlier, in March 2022, Mykhailo Podolyak, an advisor to the head of the President's Office, told "Ukrainska Pravda" that Zelensky had already survived more than ten assassination attempts. However, no one knows the details of these assassination attempts, and no one has seen any arrested or killed assassins.

In fact, there were no assassination attempts on Zelensky. At least,

not in the way they occasionally happen to leaders of different countries around the world. There was only information that in the first days of the war, a group of Russian and Chechen special forces entered the Kyiv region with orders to capture the government quarter in Kyiv and kill (or detain) President Zelensky.

This group was actively searched for, and the Ukrainian military command even publicly asked citizens to report on a column of military vehicles with the letter V painted on them. At the time, it was somehow assumed that the regular Russian army used the letter Z on their equipment, while Russian special forces were distinguished by the letter V. Later, it turned out that this was not the case. According to military expert and founder of the Conflict Intelligence Team Ruslan Leviev, the letter Z on military equipment signifies Russia's Western (Zapadny) military district, and V – the Eastern (Vostochny) military district.

Since storming the government quarter is impossible, at least without partially surrounding Kyiv, no one saw this group in the streets of the capital. Later, information emerged that the military column heading to capture the government quarter was destroyed somewhere in the Kyiv region, but details of this episode are still unknown.

Regardless, Russian troops did not reach Kyiv. The three resonant cases when Russian saboteurs were allegedly seen in the capital were actually so-called "friendly fire" incidents among Ukrainian military. The first such case occurred on February 25 in the Obolon district when local residents reported seeing armored vehicles with Russian soldiers disguised in Ukrainian uniforms attempting to break into central Kyiv. It turned out to be a Ukrainian unit, and unfortunately, several soldiers died due to this misunderstanding.

Another case of friendly fire occurred on the night of February 26, when a Ukrainian unit near the Beresteiska metro station mistook and shot at two vehicles carrying eight servicemen from the 101st brigade. The shooting was initially called a "battle" and "destruction of a sabotage group." Several months later, the military command admitted to the tragic mistake.

Finally, the third case of accidental shooting due to a lack of coordination among Ukrainian forces occurred on the evening of February 26 near the Air Fleet Bridge, 200 meters from the Ministry of Defense building. One serviceman of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, Mykhailo Dyagilev, died in this incident. After this tragic event, there

was no further information about battles in Kyiv.

Was Volodymyr Zelensky informed that instead of destroying Russian saboteurs in Kyiv, Ukrainian military accidentally shot at each other? Probably yes. At least, his aides and the head of the President's Office should have known about it. Nonetheless, Zelensky gladly fed Western journalists horror stories about how they tried to kill him.

Reading publications by Simon Shuster, who recently wrote a book about the Ukrainian president after repeatedly interacting with Zelensky himself and people from his circle, one gets the impression of being offered a cocktail of lies, manipulations, and self-admiration. At least, in the part that concerns the "heroism" of the president. Consider quotes from Shuster's article in TIME on April 28, 2022:

"The military told Zelensky that Russian strike teams had landed in Kyiv by parachute to kill or capture him and his family..." "As night fell on that first evening, shootouts flared around the government quarter..." "According to him, Russian troops made two attempts to storm the complex..."

All these quotes are falsehoods eagerly told to the American in the President's Office. Then, without necessary fact-checking, they began their journey around the world, trying to shape a distorted image of the main hero for Western readers.

In Shuster's publications, Zelensky is tried to be shown to the world as a weary father of the nation, who occasionally shares profound phrases with those around him: "I need ammunition, not a ride," "I have aged from all this wisdom I never wanted," and "Horrors make us close our eyes." The president's speechwriter's skill is undoubtedly respectable. But only a very naive person could believe that Volodymyr Zelensky is a modern reincarnation of Mahatma Gandhi.

Ukrainians have long known who they are dealing with. However, some details from Simon Shuster's book and articles are indeed interesting. At least in that they remind us once again that we are dealing with an accidental person – an actor asked to play the role of a politician. In the first days of the war, when the military, with their lives, heroism, and extremely limited amount of weapons, saved the country from demise, a frightened Zelensky was in an underground bunker, spending time watching Hollywood movies, doing fitness, playing ping-pong, and tasting wines. A couple of times a day, he recorded videos for social networks and television, and late in the evening, he went out to breathe fresh air. The president then complained mostly about the lack of sunlight and fresh air.

It must be acknowledged that in the first year of the war, Zelensky's heroic image in the West was taken at face value. Americans and Europeans sympathized with all Ukrainians, including their president. Especially since Zelensky masterfully played his role, and his texts were written with the target audience in mind. In front of the members of the U.S. Congress, he mentioned Roosevelt, in the Bundestag, he drew comparisons with the Berlin Airlift, and in the British parliament, he quoted Shakespeare.

But the war continued, and information about corruption scandals related to the theft of money the West transferred for financial support of the Ukrainian budget began to emerge from Ukraine more frequently. And while ordinary citizens did not delve into the details of corruption in a foreign country, politicians perfectly understood that the main beneficiaries of the theft of Western aid were people from Zelensky's circle.

In 2023, the effectiveness of Zelensky's speeches decreased so much that he was even denied an opportunity to speak in the U.S. Congress, and a significant part of the Republicans, who were loyal to Ukraine, turned into the main opponents of providing it with aid.

Zelensky Has Encountered a New Problem – General Zaluzhny

Before the full-scale war began, Volodymyr Zelensky's electoral prospects looked quite promising. Despite the fact that over three years of his leadership, the Ukrainian economy showed no signs of improvement, his main political rival – Petro Poroshenko – no longer posed a threat in elections. TV channels owned by oligarchs friendly to Zelensky carefully ensured that the former president appeared on air as seldom as possible. Lacking access to a broad audience, Poroshenko was unable to convey his ideas to most voters and could not shake off his low trust ratings among the populace. By that time, Yulia Tymoshenko was no longer considered a serious competitor, and the new generation of politicians were generally loners, lacking support from political parties or influential media resources. Everything was heading towards the next presidential elections following the pattern of 1999, when incumbent President Kuchma was provided with a convenient opponent – the communist leader Petro Symonenko. But now, Poroshenko was expected to play that role.

The main danger for Zelensky was an election scenario in which the opposition would rally around a charismatic politician with a low distrust rating. In 2004, such a presidential candidate was former Prime Minister Viktor Yushchenko. Despite an information blockade and a discrediting campaign on national TV channels, Yushchenko almost immediately became the main favorite of the election. Not even widespread vote-rigging could prevent his victory.

Since Poroshenko had failed to rid himself of low voter ratings, a certain vacuum emerged in the opposition environment. Many understood that, despite the former president's strong desire for a rematch after his 2019 election defeat, his chances of beating Zelensky were slim, especially when the government completely controlled national TV channels. The only chance to overthrow Zelensky was to replicate the 2004 election model. However, there was one problem: the president's opponents had no charismatic politician in mind who could become the new Viktor Yushchenko.

Theoretically, such a candidate could have been a completely new figure from the intelligentsia: a scientist or famous writer who had not previously taken an active part in politics. Voters might have been attracted to such a character, considering that representatives of the scientific and creative intelligentsia had last actively participated in Ukrainian politics in the late 1980s. Against the backdrop of the former comedian's silly jokes and his constant failures, this could create a favorable contrast between the incumbent president and the opposition candidate. Most importantly, it would be much harder to discredit a person with an unblemished reputation in the eyes of voters.

Everything changed with the onset of the full-scale war. Ukrainians immediately understood that only the military could save them from Russian occupation and, possibly, death. Since the nation's hopes were directed towards the military, this immediately drew attention to the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Valeriy Zaluzhny.

Before the war, 49-year-old Zaluzhny had appeared on news broadcasts several times and even participated in a political talk show. But he had no particular popularity before February 24, 2022.

As is known, before the war began, the Ukrainian army was critically undermanned. It lacked not just soldiers, but also ammunition. Nevertheless, even in such unfavorable conditions, the Armed Forces of Ukraine, under Zaluzhny's command, managed to

defeat the Russian army near Kyiv and protected the border city of Kharkiv from occupation.

Zaluzhny's popularity significantly increased after the successful counteroffensive in the fall of 2022, when the Ukrainian army liberated the right bank of the Kherson region and a significant part of the Kharkiv region. Ukrainians realized that the Armed Forces were led by an experienced commander capable of defeating one of the world's largest armies. At that time, President Zelensky's apparent jealousy of Zaluzhny's and the military's popularity became noticeable.

It was quite interesting to observe the government's reaction to this popularity, exemplified by the liberation of Kherson on November 11, 2022. It can be assumed that Zelensky did not like that local residents chanted "ZSU" (Zbroyni Sily Ukrayiny or "AFU", Armed Forces of Ukraine) in the main square and that the military, not the president, received all the glory. On that day, jubilant crowds of people, tears in their eyes, thanking Ukrainian soldiers for liberating their city from the occupiers, were shown on TV channels around the world. But just a few days later, on November 14, journalists from CNN, SkyNews, and Hromadske, who had recorded this video from Freedom Square, were deprived of accreditation in Ukraine. The formal reason was a violation of the rules for working in combat zones.

Zelensky visited Kherson the day after its liberation, on November 12. Surrounded by a tight security ring, he also visited Freedom Square, but nobody greeted him joyfully, let alone chanted his name.

The high trust rating of Zaluzhny began to concern the President's Office, but they could do nothing about it. Since the war continued, the Commander-in-Chief of the army played an extremely important role in defending the country. Moreover, after the liberation of large territories in the Kherson and Kharkiv regions, there was hope for further advancement of the Ukrainian army to drive the occupiers out of the southern part of the Zaporizhzhia region. At the beginning of 2023, social networks and even the press openly predicted a successful counteroffensive by the Ukrainian army. It was just a matter of waiting. Obviously, in such a situation, Zelensky could not dismiss the popular Zaluzhny.

However, the summer counteroffensive of the AFU did not achieve success. From January to April 2023, the Ukrainian army engaged in prolonged battles in the city of Bakhmut, which took a lot of time and resources. Moreover, ally countries delayed the transfer of modern armored vehicles to Ukraine, without which Zaluzhny hesitated to

start a counteroffensive.

Time passed, and as it turned out, alongside the battles for Bakhmut, the Russian army managed to build a powerful layered defense in the south, with a huge amount of minefields and dug-in fortifications. There's a theory that Zaluzhny's plan was to distract the Russians with a widely advertised offensive in the Zaporizhzhia region and strike the main blow by landing large forces on the left bank of the Dnipro. But the Russians prevented even this scenario. On the night of June 6, 2023, the occupiers blew up the Kakhovka HPP, and several million tons of water rushed downstream, flooding the low-lying left bank. As a result of this monstrous crime, hundreds of civilians and tens of thousands of animals died, but the goal was achieved. The occupiers secured their bank from a sudden offensive by the Ukrainian army. After this, the main combat operations were conducted exclusively in the Zaporizhzhia region, where the Russians had built an effective line of defense. It was not possible to break through it.

The failure of the summer counteroffensive did not undermine Zaluzhny's popularity among Ukrainians, but in Zelensky's eyes, he no longer seemed an indispensable commander. Moreover, the president found a favorite – the Commander of the Ground Forces of the AFU, Olexandr Syrsky. By the fall of 2023, a situation had developed where the Ukrainian army was no longer obedient only to Zaluzhny. Syrsky, who was responsible for the front in the Donetsk and Kharkiv regions, could receive orders directly from Zelensky, bypassing the Commander-in-Chief of the AFU. Additionally, the president had another favorite – the head of the Main Directorate of Intelligence of the Ministry of Defense, Kyrylo Budanov. He also reported directly to Zelensky and had significant military resources at his disposal.

The President's Office was extremely irritated by any appearance of Valeriy Zaluzhny in the media. He was almost not shown on the "Unified Telethon," and there were even rumors that Zaluzhny was forbidden to give interviews to Ukrainian media. Whether this is true or not, no one knows, but the Commander-in-Chief of the AFU indeed did not give interviews to Ukrainian journalists after the war began. However, Budanov practically weekly commented on various events, both to local and foreign journalists.

In the fall of 2023, the relationship between Zelensky and Zaluzhny significantly deteriorated after the army commander stated in an interview with The Economist that the war with Russia had reached a stalemate and was becoming positional. According to Zaluzhny, at this

stage, one should not expect a rapid breakthrough at the front. Future success depends on who gains a technological advantage over the opponent.

Zelensky did not like the tone of this interview. In the president's team, there was a tradition of informing the people only about the good prospects of the war. Three days after the interview was published, the Deputy Head of the President's Office, Ihor Zhovkva, stated that the military should not comment on what is happening at the front to the general public. Zelensky himself spoke out. On November 4, 2023, at a joint press conference with the head of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, the President of Ukraine said that he does not consider the situation at the front to be "stalemate," as Zaluzhny had described it. This was the first case of public disagreements between the Commander-in-Chief of the AFU and Zelensky.

After the president's press conference, someone, obviously, was ordered to start discrediting Valeriy Zaluzhny in the press and social networks. On November 6, an article appeared on the Bastion investigative website stating that the Commander-in-Chief of the AFU, during such a difficult time for the country, somehow finds time to write a scientific dissertation. And most terribly, at the Odesa Law Academy, headed by Serhiy Kivalov, a former ally of the fugitive president Yanukovych.

Then, the baton was taken up by a deputy from the "Servant of the People" party with a rather scandalous reputation, Mariana Bezuhla. For several months, up to Zaluzhny's dismissal, she published rude posts on her Facebook, writing about the professional incompetence of the Commander-in-Chief and even hinting at his fondness for alcohol.

Since it was clear to everyone that everything was heading towards Zaluzhny's dismissal, information began to spread in parliament that, on the command of the President's Office, law enforcement agencies could start investigating the "surrender of Kherson." And Valeriy Zaluzhny could be accused, along with other representatives of the military command.

Raising the question of "who let the Russians into the south" would have been very risky for Zelensky, even considering that he needed to somehow reduce Zaluzhny's high rating. Facts indicate that a large part of the blame for the army's unpreparedness for war lies with the president. Therefore, the team at Zelensky's Office decided not to air their dirty laundry. On January 29, 2024, two sources stated that

Zaluzhny was offered to voluntarily resign. In return, the Commander-in-Chief of the AFU was offered to become the Ambassador of Ukraine to the United Kingdom or to move to the position of Deputy Head of the National Security and Defense Council. Of course, both positions were chosen specifically to bury any political ambitions of Zaluzhny.

Ideally, Zelensky wanted to avoid a situation where he could be accused of dismissing a popular general. That's why the President's Office insisted that Zaluzhny himself write a resignation letter. But he refused both positions and also did not want to resign voluntarily.

Interestingly, previously, Ivan Bakanov and Oleksiy Reznikov, each after their resignation, really wanted to get the position of ambassador in London. But the British Foreign Office somehow did not show enthusiasm for either of these candidates.

After Zaluzhny refused to write a resignation letter, Zelensky took a pause. The official announcement of the dismissal of the Commander-in-Chief of the AFU was made a week later, without any scandal, with gratitude for the work done and the awarding of the Order of the Hero of Ukraine.

Insiders from the President's Office reported that when choosing a new army commander, Zelensky was leaning towards the candidacies of Budanov or Syrsky. Many were puzzled by the fact that the head of Ukrainian intelligence, Kyrylo Budanov, had previously had no experience leading any military units. Once he was the commander of a special forces group that made a daring raid into the territory of occupied Crimea in 2016. Then he moved to work in the Main Directorate of Intelligence of the Ministry of Defense. After the "Wagnergate" and the scandalous dismissal of Vasyl Burba, Budanov became the head of this department.

In the end, common sense prevailed, and Zelensky decided not to tempt fate. The new Commander-in-Chief of the AFU became the more experienced Olexandr Syrsky, Zaluzhny's deputy and commander of the Ground Forces.

On February 16, 2024, The Washington Post published an article about how the Kremlin had been conducting a disinformation campaign in Ukraine for many months, aimed at creating a rift between the political and military leadership. The essence of the article boiled down to the fact that throughout 2023, Russian propagandists and "troll factories" created thousands of posts and videos on social networks, part of which promoted the theme of a military coup in Ukraine, allegedly being prepared by Zaluzhny

against Zelensky.

Indeed, such a campaign of spreading disinformation was conducted, and to a certain extent, it achieved its goal. Knowing Zelensky's paranoid fear of the possibility of a new revolution, the Kremlin, through structures under its control, in every possible way fueled these fears. The fact that, along with Zaluzhny, practically all members of his team were dismissed, most of whom were experienced generals, indicates that the president's decision was largely due to personal reasons – the unwillingness to have in the military leadership people loyal to Zaluzhny.

If we discard conspiracy theories that claim Zelensky got rid of Zaluzhny so that he would not interfere with him negotiating with Putin about freezing the war, then the president's decision arose for the following reasons:

- 60% – the desire to get rid of a possible competitor in future presidential elections;
- 20% – fear of a possible military coup in the spring of 2024, after the formal expiration of Zelensky's 5-year presidential term;
- 10% – dissatisfaction with the failure of the summer counteroffensive of the AFU;
- 10% – the desire to put at the head of the army a person with whom it would be more convenient for the president to work.

It is worth noting that the Russian disinformation campaign was not aimed at lowering Zelensky's rating, but at the dismissal of the Commander-in-Chief of the AFU. Zaluzhny is much more dangerous to the Kremlin than the current president. Volodymyr Zelensky is a person who, throughout his conscious life, has shown complete indifference and even contempt for the national revival of Ukraine. An accidental person who, by the will of circumstances, found himself in a difficult situation.

In other words, Putin was much more frightened by the fact that there was a bust of Stepan Bandera on Zaluzhny's desk. Russia does not need a new Poroshenko, who would consistently develop Ukraine taking into account its national interests. Russia would benefit much more from having an empty-headed populist in Kyiv who, with his incompetence and corruption, would finally ruin the country.

Positive Achievements and Missed Opportunities

Against the backdrop of the disaster that Volodymyr Zelensky's victory in the 2019 elections led to, it would be unfair not to mention his presidency's positive achievements. Surprisingly, there were some. It's important to note that by the end of 2019, Ukraine was in a situation where the president could achieve almost everything his predecessors failed to accomplish. However, he almost didn't take advantage of this opportunity.

The propaganda machine of Kolomoisky so thoroughly destroyed the old political system that, riding the wave of his popularity, Zelensky managed to obtain a single-party majority in parliament. His faction had 254 votes. Together with deputies elected in single-mandate districts and loyal MPs from other parties, the president could easily gather a constitutional majority. Neither Yanukovych, Poroshenko, nor even Kuchma ever managed to do this.

How did Volodymyr Zelensky use this gift of fate? Undoubtedly, the main achievement of his presidential term was the land reform. Ukraine finally recognized private ownership of agricultural land. For about 30 years, not a single president could gather votes in parliament to pass this important bill. The lack of private land ownership hindered the development of the agricultural sector. Hardly any investor would risk building a greenhouse complex, livestock farm, or planting fruit trees on land that does not belong to them. As a result, Ukrainian agriculture suffered: the level of investment in the agricultural sector was extremely low.

Zelensky finally changed this situation. Despite resistance from the pro-Russian "Opposition Platform" faction and Yulia Tymoshenko's faction, Zelensky managed to get this bill passed in parliament. Together with the "Servant of the People" faction, Petro Poroshenko's "European Solidarity" faction voted for land reform. After the liberalization of the land market, Ukraine's agricultural potential has been growing year by year.

During the war, Volodymyr Zelensky took a rather tough stance towards Russia, and this can only be positively assessed. He correctly understood that trying to appease Putin through negotiations or agreeing to lose part of the territories would only worsen the situation. Zelensky did not accept the option of resigning to the loss of territories, which some politicians in the West and even in Ukraine suggested to him. He also categorically opposed freezing the war.

Russia was unable to get the break it needed to restore its military potential and consolidate its position on the occupied territories.

During his presidency, Volodymyr Zelensky actively promoted the development of digital services. Ukrainians were among the first in the world to receive digital documents in a mobile application. In many cases, citizens no longer need to personally visit state institutions to obtain certificates, register benefits, and property rights.

This concludes the list of Volodymyr Zelensky's achievements. Having no problems with passing the necessary bills in parliament, the president showed no desire to combat corruption in the judiciary. Unlike Poroshenko, who did not have a stable majority in parliament, Zelensky had all the opportunities to destroy the judicial mafia. But he chose not to do so, preferring to cooperate with "the right" judges.

After coming to power, Zelensky showed authoritarian traits. He reacted extremely negatively to any criticism towards him. To prevent a decrease in his popularity, the president ordered the shutdown of opposition TV channels. The direct television broadcast of parliament sessions was also discontinued. The president did not want Ukrainians to be able to see critical speeches by opposition politicians.

The economic policy of Zelensky's government turned out to be a mix of populism, incompetence, and corruption. Large state-owned enterprises, which under the previous president Poroshenko paid significant amounts in profit tax, became unprofitable with Zelensky's rise to power. Huge funds from the state budget were transferred to dubious private companies to finance the road construction program.

To profit from the construction and repair of roads, Zelensky limited funding for the army. Before the start of the full-scale invasion, the Ukrainian armed forces had a critical level of undermanning. This led to a disaster in the south of the country, where due to the lack of a full-fledged defense, the Russians easily occupied vast territories, including the cities of Kherson, Melitopol, Berdyansk, Nova Kakhovka, and Enerhodar. The surrender of Melitopol and Berdyansk without a fight led to the encirclement of the 500,000-strong Mariupol, resulting in the death of about 20,000 civilians.

At the time of writing this book, Volodymyr Zelensky is still in office as the President of Ukraine and does not hide his desire to be re-elected for a second term. He does not admit his guilt for the failure in preparing for the war and explains everything by unfavorable circumstances. Currently, while martial law is still in effect in Ukraine,

society cannot give an objective assessment of the president's work. But Zelensky cannot hide from history behind the propaganda foam of pro-government TV channels forever. Time will put everything in its place.